



Hex Signs



Sacred and Celestial Symbolism in Pennsylvania Dutch Barn Stars



A COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION

Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University

March 1 - November 3, 2019

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Hex Signs: Sacred and Celestial Symbolism in Pennsylvania Dutch Barn Stars is a collaborative effort between Glencairn Museum and the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at Kutztown University. Glencairn invites a diverse audience to engage with religious beliefs and practices, past and present, with the goal of fostering empathy and building understanding among people of all beliefs. The exhibition features items from the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at Kutztown University, the Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center, Special Collections at the Martin Library of Franklin and Marshall College, the Pennsylvania Folklife Society at the Myrin Library of Ursinus College, as well as the private collections of Eric Claypoole, Patrick J. Donmoyer, and Harold & Esther (Hill) Derr, daughter of barn star artist Milton Hill.



This exhibition catalog is dedicated with gratitude to the memory of barn star artist Milton J. Hill (1887-1972) of Virginville, Berks County, Pennsylvania, and to his wife Gertrude (Strausser) Hill, who supported his work, as well as to his family, especially his daughter Esther (Hill) Derr and her husband Harold Derr; his nephew Bart Hill; his grandson Lee Heffner; his granddaughter Dorian (Derr) Fetherolf, and all of his descendants living and departed. A true artist of the stars, Milton Hill's commitment to the celestial orientation of this unique Pennsylvania art form preserved and continued the folk culture's traditional views for generations to come.



Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania
22 Luckenbill Road, Kutztown, PA, 19530
www.kutztown.edu/pgchc · 610-683-1589

GLENCAIRN
MUSEUM

Glencairn Museum
1001 Cathedral Road, Bryn Athyn, PA, 19009
www.glencairnmuseum.org · 267-502-2600
info@glencairnmuseum.org

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SACRED & CELESTIAL SYMBOLISM IN PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH BARN STARS

By Patrick J. Donmoyer

Nestled in the rolling hills and valleys of southeastern Pennsylvania, a cultural treasure lies hidden in plain sight. Vibrant murals of stars, sunbursts, and moons painted in vivid colors punctuate the exteriors of the generously-proportioned barns of the Pennsylvania Dutch country in a manner that is unique among American artistic traditions. Complex, geometric, yet deceptively simple, these abstract representations of heavenly bodies once saturated the rural landscape, and now serve as cultural beacons of the robust and persistent presence of the Pennsylvania Dutch, who once settled and still maintain a strong presence in the region.

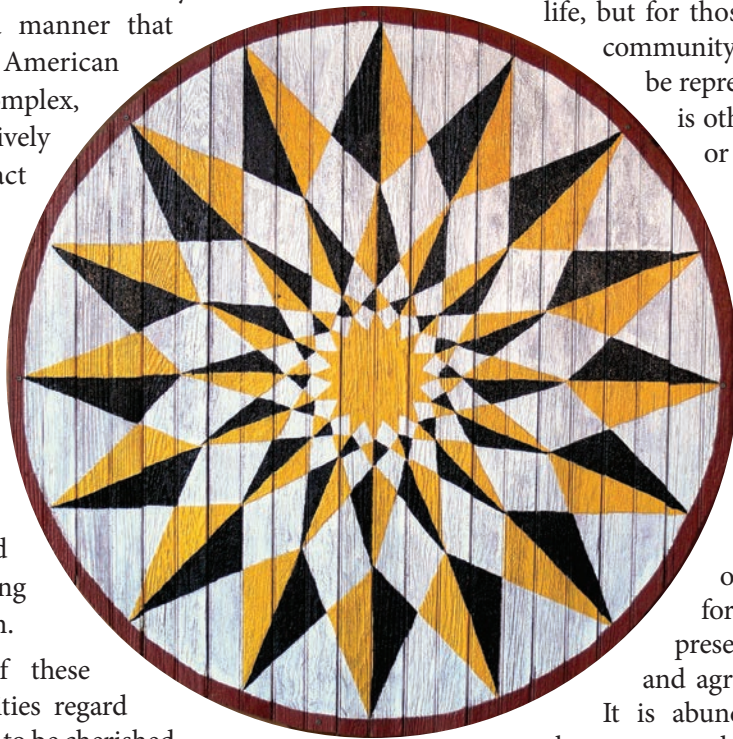
The residents of these quiet rural communities regard the stars as something to be cherished, yet perfectly ordinary—an agricultural expression of folk art, and as commonplace as eating pie. Nevertheless, for the outside world, the barn stars, also commonly called hex signs, have captured the American imagination as generations of visitors to the region marvel at the seamless integration of art into the agrarian countryside.

Just as humanity has marveled at the stars in the sky throughout history, and sought some sense of meaningful interpretation of their order and light, so too have these folk art depictions of the stars evoked a sense of wonder in all who behold them. For the

Pennsylvania Dutch they are part of the fabric of life, but for those from outside of the community, the stars are thought to be representative of that which is otherworldly, mysterious, or supernatural.

Between these two different views, the history of the folk art barn stars has been the subject of debate for nearly a century, and is only now beginning to take shape yet again as Pennsylvanians in the present day not only rediscover the art form, but also strive to preserve their open spaces and agricultural communities.

It is abundantly clear, however, that no matter how the stars have been celebrated, interpreted, commercialized, or appropriated throughout the centuries by inhabitants and visitors alike, their history is inextricably linked to the Pennsylvania barns themselves, and the Pennsylvania Dutch folk culture that built the barns, transformed the landscape, and continues to persevere in an ever-changing world.



Weathered Barn Star, Windsor Castle, Berks County, ca. 1920.

Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University, Gift of Bart Hill, Nephew of Milton Hill.

This restored sixteen-pointed star is one of a series from a barn in Windsor Castle, Berks County. Due to the star's complexity, it was attributed to the work of the prolific barn star artist Milton Hill who painted extensively in the immediate area. These stars were likely painted in the early twentieth century, but show patterns of highly pronounced relief, produced by the sun's weathering of the wooden barn siding.



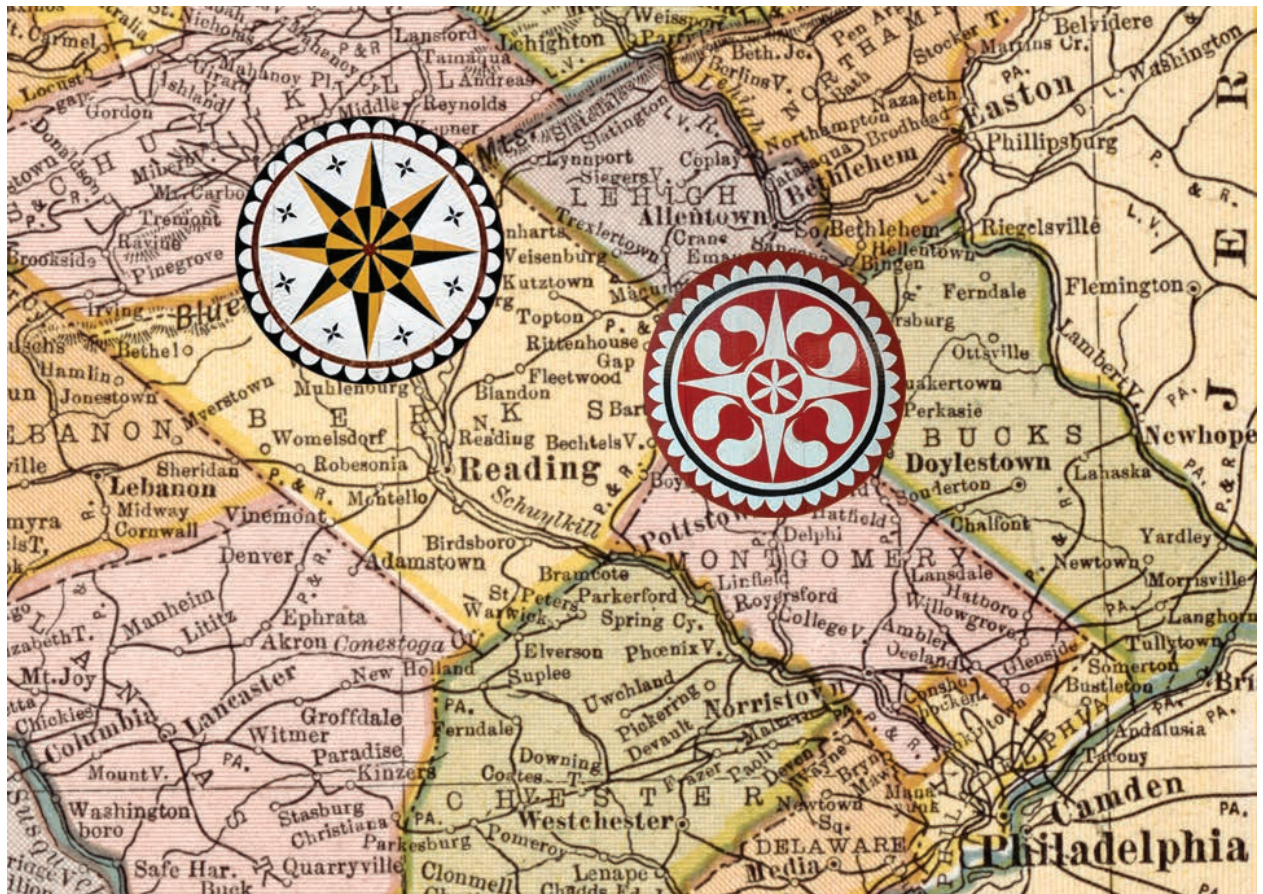
A Classic Decorated Pennsylvania Barn, Albany Township, Berks County, ca. 1850, courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer. The barn standing at the location of the old Ida Bond Hotel was last painted in the 1980s by Johnny and Eric Claypoole of Lenhartsville, Berks County. The barn is a classic mid-nineteenth century Pennsylvania barn, featuring arches over the doors, and four twelve-pointed stars across the barn's forebay siding. No longer visible are three sets of arches over the windows, with three crosses within the arches.

A SURVEY OF THE REGION

Although the decorated barns of the region have been photographed and documented in numerous waves over the years, beginning in the first half of the twentieth century,¹ the landscape is in a state of constant change. Until recently, no comprehensive surveys of the region's decorated barns had taken place since the 1950s,² when the tradition was still very much in its hey-day and farming communities were substantially more stable. Due to rapid land development, suburbanization, changes in ownership, and economic circumstances, the range of visual expression in Pennsylvania barns of the

region has diminished, leaving behind fragmented rural landscapes.

It was with these dramatic changes in mind that I embarked on a journey to comprehensively document all decorated barns in Berks and Lehigh counties—the heartland of the tradition—and to continue beyond the counties' borders into Northern Montgomery, Northampton, Upper Bucks, Southern Schuylkill, Eastern Lebanon, and Northern Lancaster counties. As an artist myself, I felt compelled to document this cultural and artistic phenomenon before significant portions of the work were lost to memory.



Map of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Photos of Stars by Patrick J. Donmoyer.

Southeastern Pennsylvania is home to two distinct concentrations of barn decorations, defined by geographical features that separate the region. Star patterns are predominant along the Blue Mountain, part of the Appalachian Mountain Range bordering Berks, Northern Lehigh, and Schuylkill counties. Floral motifs are found throughout the Lehigh Valley, which spans Northampton, Lehigh, Bucks, and Montgomery counties. Barn stars are rarely found west of the Susquehanna, except for traditional wooden applique stars found in Bedford, Somerset, and Washington counties.

I set to work advocating for the support of a present-day survey of the region, and received research funding through the Peter Wentz Farmstead Society of Montgomery County, which awards the Albert T. and Elizabeth Gamon Scholarship to support studies in Pennsylvania Dutch culture. Although I had already started photographing barns as early as 2006, in the summer of 2008 I set out with atlases, and systematically drove every public road in Berks County to photograph and document the locations of decorated barns with original barn star paintings.³

Although I had expected to document an artistic tradition in decline—and that was precisely what I found in some areas—I was surprised and delighted to find that the sheer number of decorated barns in Berks alone had outstripped previous estimates for the whole region.⁴ I documented over 400 decorated barns in 2008 with the majority in Northern Berks, and have added scores from neighboring counties ever since, tallying over 500 for the total region. The epicenter of the barn star region is geographically located in Kutztown, with the overwhelming majority of the total tradition within a 30 mile radius.

Most surprising of all was the fact that these numbers continue to increase by as many as half a dozen barns a year, as active artists, such as Eric Claypoole of Lenhartsville, as well as property owners, continue to paint barn stars in the region. This is a sign of a healthy folk tradition, and one that is currently in no danger of disappearing from the landscape altogether. While the value of a survey is to create a snapshot in time, this survey has become a living record, including both the occasional loss of a historic barn, as well as the documentation of a living tradition that continues to shape the landscape in new and exciting ways.

As with all forms of research, an understanding of the barns was only possible through close cooperation with the cultural community of the Pennsylvania Dutch. As a native of Lebanon County, with roots in Berks, and as a speaker of the Pennsylvania Dutch language, my research is based not only in surveying the barns, but also in exploring the cultural memory of the region through oral histories, interviews, and other primary source documents, and continued dialog with the elders of the community and the families of property owners and artists. It is through this lens that the cultural significance and social history of the art form is best understood, and in doing so we can reach a better understanding of the folk culture of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

Above: A classic eight-pointed star, Albany Township, Berks County.

Below: A Lehigh County star, including raindrop shapes and floral petal border characteristic of the region. Lower Macungie, Lehigh County.

Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

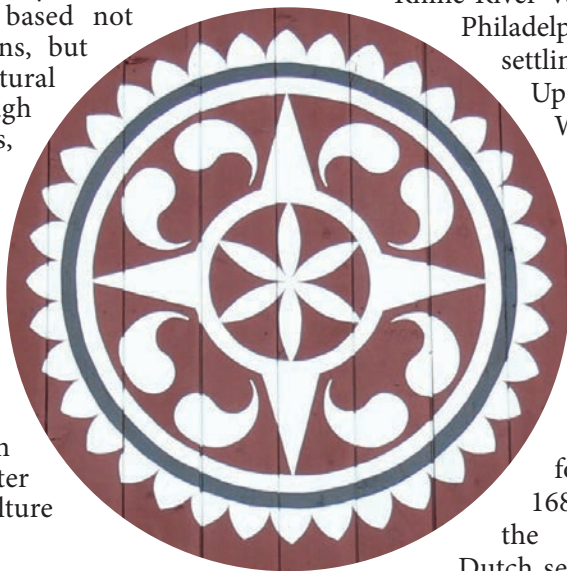
THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH

The Pennsylvania Dutch are the present-day descendants of several waves of German-speaking immigrants from central Europe beginning at the tail end of the seventeenth century, up until the time of the American Revolution, and shortly thereafter. These immigrants came from German-speaking regions of what is today Germany, including the Rhineland-Pfalz, Rhine-Hesse, and Baden-Württemberg, as well as parts of Switzerland, Alsace, France, and as far east as Silesia in Poland and the Czech Republic.⁵

Fleeing the economic, social, and religious disruptions of perpetual warfare throughout the continent, these agrarian people departed Europe through the corridor of the Rhine River Valley, and arrived at ports in Philadelphia and New York before settling southeastern Pennsylvania.

Upon their arrival in the New World, they were required to swear an oath of loyalty to the British Crown, and their English neighbors referred to them as “Dutchmen”—a word that originally applied to the broader family of German-speaking people from European territories.⁶

Beginning with the founding of Germantown in 1683, and spreading throughout the region, the Pennsylvania Dutch settled much of what is today the counties of Berks, Lehigh, Schuylkill, Northampton, Northern Montgomery, Upper Bucks, Lancaster, Lebanon, and beyond. Their distinctive agriculture, religious expression, arts and





Twenty-Four Original Barn Stars, Surveys of Berks, Lehigh, Schuylkill, and Montgomery Counties. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

Barn decorations exist in a wide diversity of forms, drawing upon celestial imagery blended with floral geometry. While the influence of specific artists can be clearly seen in certain communities, as a whole the entire region displays a broad range of patterns, colors, and proportions. Star patterns occur most commonly in eight, six, twelve, and four-pointed varieties, with numerous border styles and articulations between each point. Floral patterns combine lobed points, raindrop shapes in a variety of configurations, and borders suggesting the petals of a blossom.

architecture, industry, and trades, have shaped and been shaped by the broader American experience as these immigrants and their descendants migrated throughout the United States and into Southern Appalachia and the Shenandoah Valley, the Midwest and the Ozarks, the West Coast, and Ontario, Canada.

The majority of the Pennsylvania Dutch established communities organized around Lutheran and Reformed congregations. Only roughly four percent were members of sectarian groups, consisting of Anabaptist and Pietist Communities, including the plain communities of the Amish, the Mennonites, as well as the German Baptist Brethren and the Moravians. Around one percent were Roman Catholics.⁷

What originally unified them, in all their diverse creeds and places of origin, was the German language, spoken in a wide variety of distinctive dialects at the time of immigration. This coalesced into the spoken vernacular language of *Deitsch*, or Pennsylvania Dutch, a distinctive American hybrid that is similar in structure and sound to the Palatine dialects of High German today, along with an admixture of Swiss elements and English loan-words. Pennsylvania Dutch is spoken by over 400,000 people in North America today, and it is considered one of the fastest growing small minority languages in the United States, with the core of its speakers in the plain communities of the Old Order Amish and Mennonites.⁸

However distinct the plain communities may be in the American public imagination of today, these groups once formed only a relatively small portion of the Pennsylvania Dutch population, while the Lutheran and Reformed families who embraced American fashions and customs were the majority.⁹ It was from this broader cultural group that the tradition of decorated barns proceeds, culled from a vibrant past and rendered in colorful folk art expression into the present day.

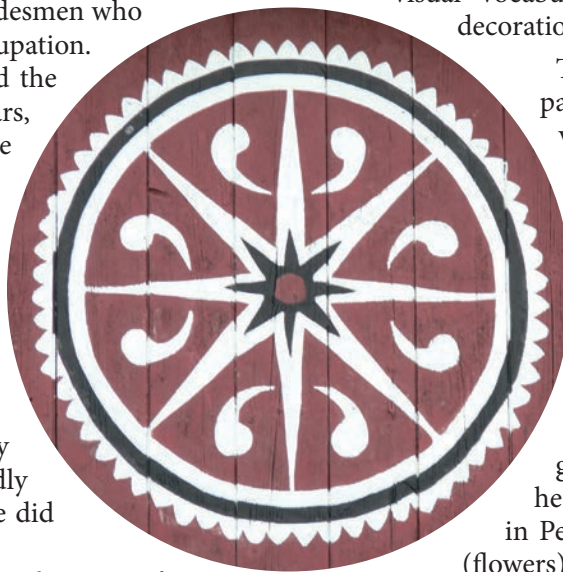
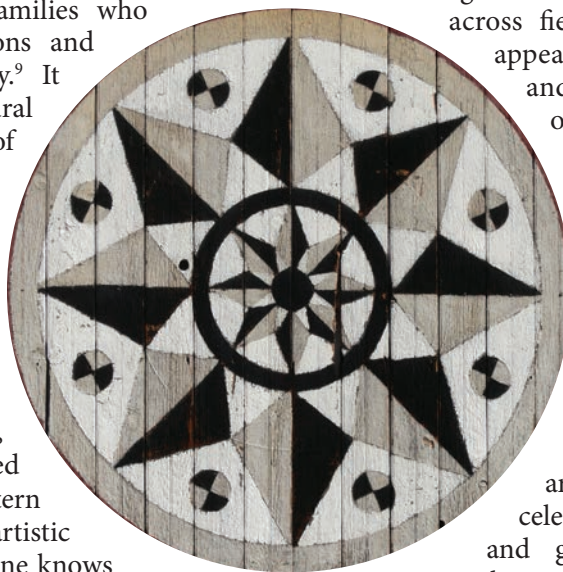
ART OF THE BARN

As a living tradition, barn star painters have graced the landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania with their artistic presence for centuries. No one knows who the first artists were and precisely when they began to paint stars on the wooden siding of Pennsylvania barns.¹⁰ They were likely farmers, carpenters, builders, and tradesmen who painted as a secondary occupation. Over time, their art inspired the classic arrangements of stars, painted arches, and decorative borders that characterize the rural landscape. Although the first artists kept no records of their work, wrote no firsthand accounts, and even their names are lost to the sands of time, their story is preserved in the nineteenth-century barns which still stand proudly throughout the region. Little did

they know that their work would one day capture the interest of people across the United States, and come to symbolize Pennsylvania Dutch culture as a whole.

Large and bold enough to be seen from across fields and valleys, barn stars appear in series across the façades and gable ends of barns and outbuildings, serving as focal points in the farmscapes of the Pennsylvania Dutch. These elaborate geometric murals, when paired together with decorative painted trim, accent an otherwise quite ordinary agricultural structure, elevating it beyond mere utility to the level of folk art. Many of these designs are celestial, depicting sunbursts and geometric stars of varying numbers of points. Other designs are floral, featuring radial bursts of petals in organic patterns. These two types of motifs form the basic visual vocabulary of Pennsylvania's barn decorations.

These classic geometric star patterns have been called a variety of names over the years, even within the predominantly Pennsylvania Dutch communities where the tradition originates.¹¹ In the local vernacular, these motifs have been called *Schtanne* (stars), a term descriptive of their angular, radial forms as abstract, geometric representations of heavenly bodies. Another name in Pennsylvania Dutch is *Blumme* (flowers), suggesting the very same geometry that is also commonly found in the delicate blossoms of the terrestrial sphere. In keeping with this notion of plant geometry, barn decorations in this region also feature distinctive



Above: An eight-pointed star within a star, characteristic of the Northern Berks-Lehigh border.

Bottom: An eight-pointed star with raindrops between each star point, painted in the classic Lehigh Valley color scheme of red, white, and black. Upper Milford Township, Lehigh County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

rain-drop shapes between each point of the radial patterns. These are combined in ways that suggest certain floral species, and were once occasionally called *Lillye* (lilies) or *Dullebaane* (tulips).¹²

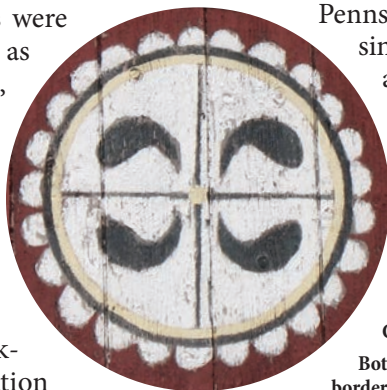
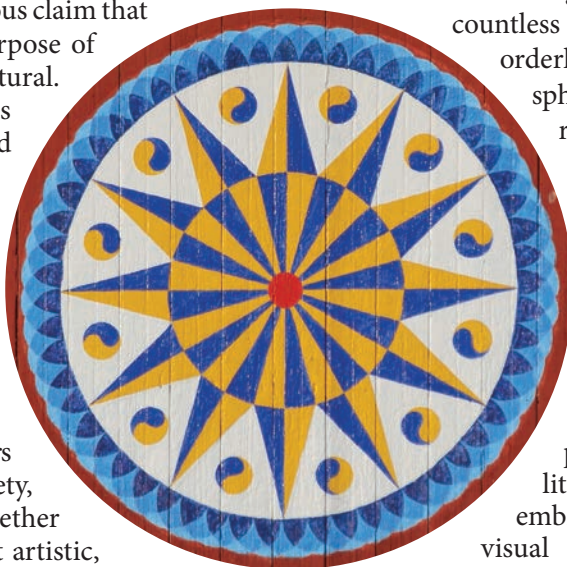
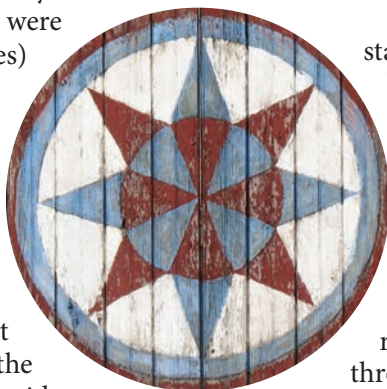
Although these Pennsylvania Dutch terms predominated long before English terms were in common use, nevertheless the barn decorations are widely known as “hex signs”—an idea that did not originate among the folk, but first appeared in tourism literature of the early twentieth century.¹³ These outsider theories promoted the spurious claim that the stars served the sole purpose of protection from the supernatural. Although these accounts were highly imaginative and lacking any basis in fact, they were nevertheless some of the very first travelogues written about the decorated Pennsylvania barns, which served to introduce broad American audiences to the folk art of Pennsylvania.

Nevertheless, these stars of seemingly infinite variety, color, and form, tell an altogether different story of the vibrant artistic, agricultural, and spiritual traditions of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Barn stars were not expressions of “superstition” as the tourist literature suggested, but abstract images of the heavens, refined by generations of artistic interest in geometry and agricultural interest in the stars. These beacons of celestial order and heralds of the annual progression of the seasons were once an essential part of the folk-cultural world view, and the inspiration for artistic expressions that permeated the material culture and architecture of Pennsylvania.¹⁴

SACRED & CELESTIAL GEOMETRY

Paralleling the wide variety of barn star motifs and designs, there has been a diversity of associations and meanings for the various star patterns throughout the centuries. While artists and barn owners alike see the stars as alternately “decorative,” “representative,” “symbolic,” or all of the above, very few resist the idea that the star patterns have represented many different things throughout the generations. Just as humans throughout the ages have projected countless interpretations upon the orderly movements of the celestial sphere, so too have the artistic renderings of these celestial bodies on Pennsylvania barns been the subject of a wide variety of interpretations, theories, and organizing principles.

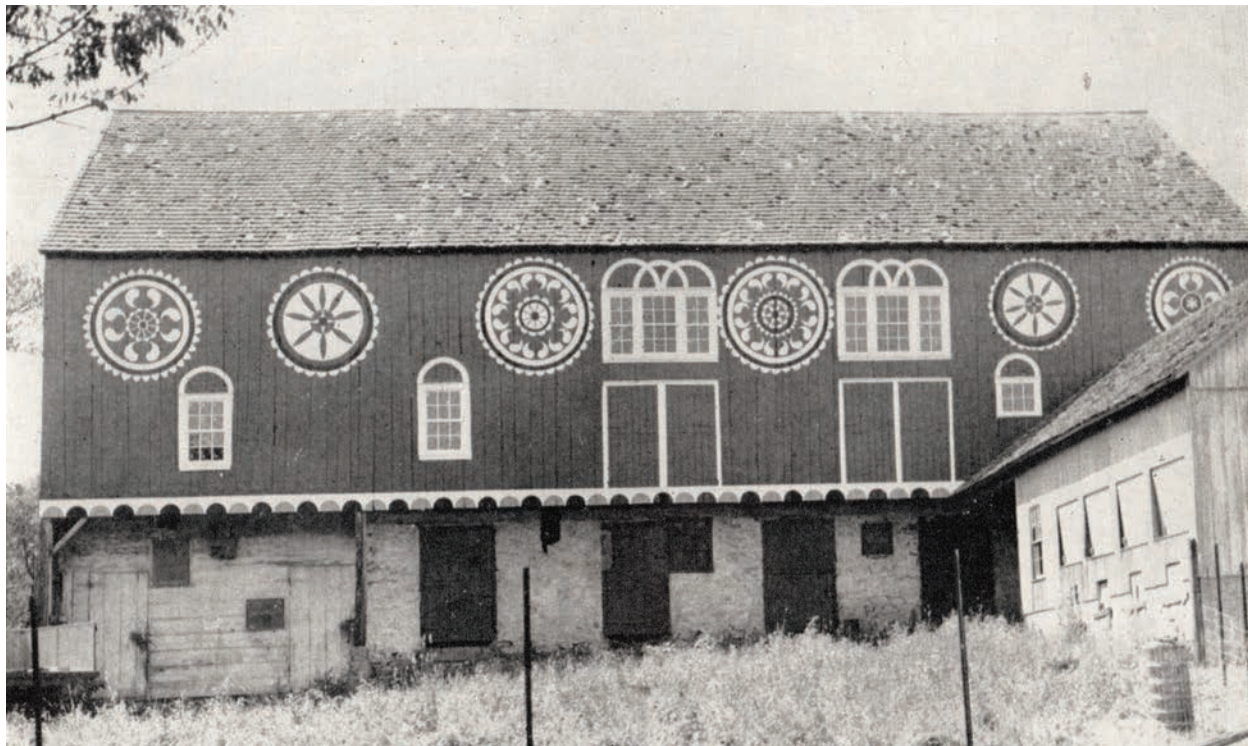
While some historic barn star painters resisted the idea that the star patterns had any inherent literal meaning, others embraced a very basic form of visual symbolism that parallels many aspects of the folk culture in Pennsylvania, as well as in Europe, where similar designs appear in folk art and architecture. Certain contemporary



Above: An eight-pointed star with maltese cross pattern in the center. Jackson Township, Lebanon County.

Middle: A twelve-pointed star recently restored by artist Eric Claypoole, with interlacing border and circular motifs between each star point, composed of two of the raindrop shapes common in the Lehigh Valley. Albany Township, Berks County.

Bottom: A four-pointed star from the Berks-Lehigh border with symmetrical arrangements of raindrops, suggesting the opening of a flower. District Township, Berks County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.



Historic Bucks County Barn, Photograph by Guy F. Reinert, ca. 1950, Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

This barn once stood in Bucks County, near the border with Lehigh and Montgomery, and was painted by the prolific Noah Weiss (1842-1907), a hotel proprietor, wood carver, and folk artist of the Lehigh Valley. Weiss had no formal training, but was a master carver and painter, producing religious scenes of biblical stories for the walls of his hotel. He was also an innovative designer whose elaborate barn stars featured intricate raindrop patterns in radial formations that have become classic in the Lehigh Valley.

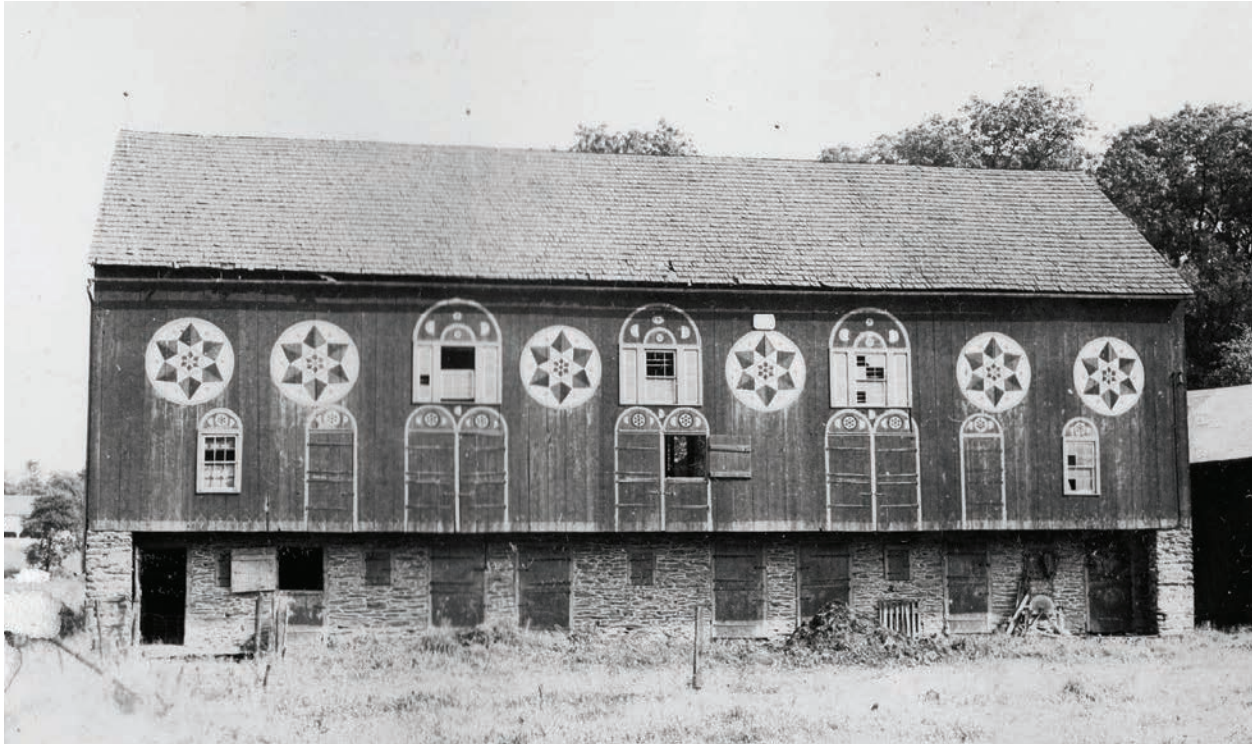
painters, such as Eric Claypoole of Lenhartsville, Berks County, draw upon oral history in the region to describe what the stars may represent numerically. On the most basic level, many associated meanings are based upon the number of star points or other visual elements. However, since the numbers do not have a single, fixed meaning, but are associated with a wide variety of concepts, the numerology of the barn star is also thought to express a wide variety of cosmological or religious ideas.

For instance, some have considered four-pointed figures to be expressions of the four seasons, or the cardinal points of the compass, while others have attributed the four-pointed star to the Christian concept of the cross. This alternately cosmological and religious significance of numbers is also applied to the pattern of the twelve-pointed star, which according to some is illustrative of the twelve months, and according to others is

representative of the twelve apostles with a solid red circle in the center to symbolize Jesus Christ, while still others have compared the twelve points to the twelve tribes of Israel.¹⁵

Other examples of numerical significance that are religious in nature include the six-pointed star—as a symbol of the six biblical days of creation in Judeo-Christian tradition; the five-pointed star corresponding to the five wounds of Christ; the seven-pointed star representing the six days of creation plus the Sabbath day of rest; the nine-pointed star as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the nine “fruits of the spirit” in the Book of Galatians; and the eight-pointed star as a reference to resurrection, as Christ rose on the first day of the next week following his death, or the eighth day, signifying renewal and a new beginning.

These classic Christian interpretations of geometric figures are widespread in church liturgical



Historic Lehigh County Barn, Photography by William Ferrell, ca. 1940, Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

Once called “the most decorated” in the region, this barn is located in New Smithville, Lehigh County, close to the border with Berks. The front forebay wall features three pairs of six-pointed repeating star patterns. Each door and window is crowned with a star and a pair of moons. On each gable end, there is a triad of star patterns with a small star in a white triangle appearing to shine down from just under the pinnacle of the roof, as if the other stars were projections of its light.

symbols and architecture,¹⁶ but have never been uniformly accepted in their entirety as part of Pennsylvania’s folk culture. Protestant communities in early Pennsylvania deliberately avoided the continuation of Roman Catholic symbolic emblems, and only later accepted these ideas when Protestant churches in America intentionally reintegrated such liturgical elements during the Victorian Gothic revival. However, these ideas certainly held some appeal among the Pennsylvania Dutch of the late nineteenth century, who treasured their highly ornamented Victorian family Bibles, and eventually replaced many of their small, austere meetinghouse churches with the rural and urban American equivalents of cathedrals.¹⁷

For barn star patterns, however, numerological religious meanings are complementary and are interwoven with cosmological significance, such as in the case of the number seven. The seven days

of the week are not only a measurement of time specific to biblical literature, but are also connected with the seven visible planets of the ancients, who named the days of the week after these celestial bodies. Likewise, the number twelve is not only the number of the establishment of earthly spiritual authority and organization through the Apostles, it is also the number of the signs of the zodiac, the twelve-fold division of the solar year. In this same manner, the four-pointed star can symbolize the four elements and physical manifestation, and the eight-pointed star the cardinal and intermediate points of the compass, defined by the annual progression of the sun.¹⁸

Although many of the celestial patterns found on Pennsylvania barns have held countless symbolic associations over the centuries, their use as traditional decorative motifs has remained constant both in Europe and the New World.



The Barn at Grim Manor, Maxatawny Township, Berks County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

A classic Berks County arrangement of stars, painted trim, and decorative borders. Although the stars are not locally believed to serve a protective function, the three crosses above windows and doorways are not merely a decorative scheme, but a blessing of the structure.

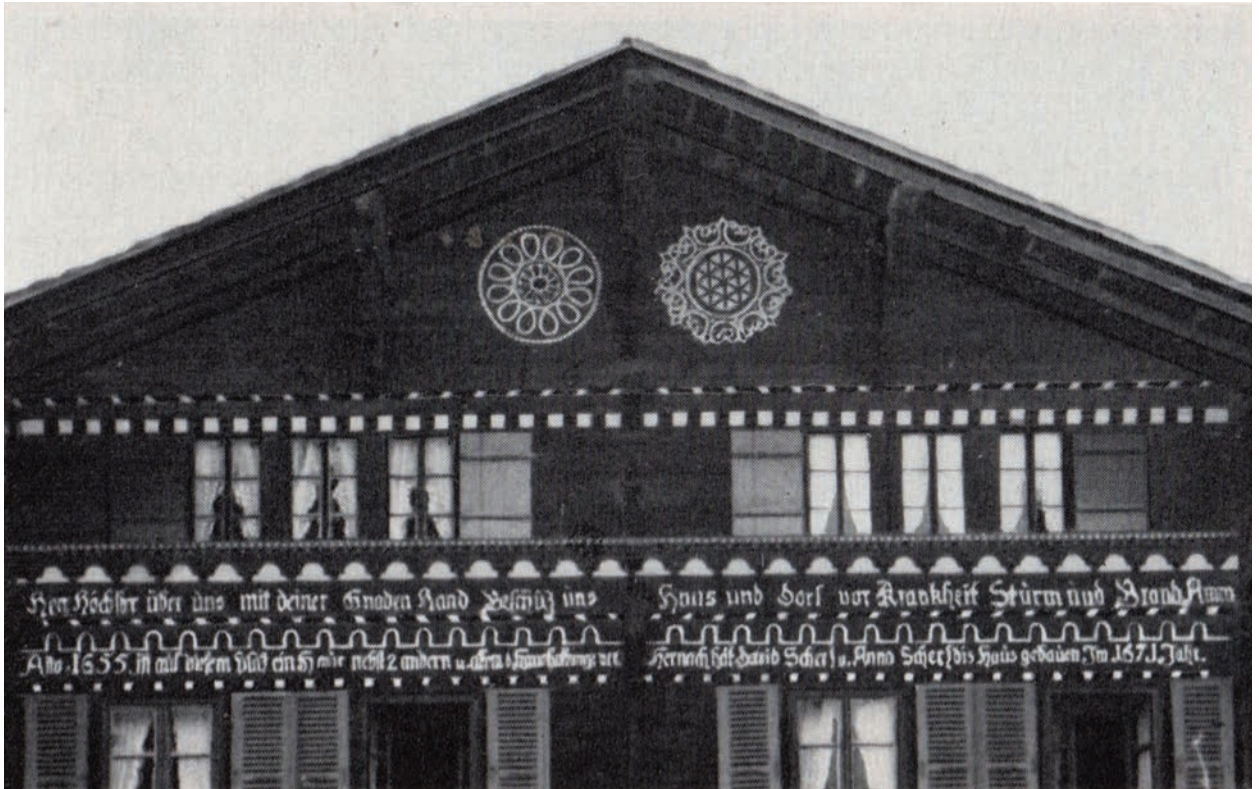
THE DECORATED PENNSYLVANIA BARN

It was once commonly believed that the barn stars first appeared on the landscape with the advent of commercially available ready-mixed paints and the widespread establishment of painting crews in the late nineteenth century.¹⁹ We know today that the earliest stars were painted generations prior, when paints were mixed by the artists from old recipes combining oils, pigments, and raw materials that were both locally available and imported for sale. Thus the availability of paint was never a limiting factor in the painting of barn stars, architectural elements, or decorated furniture.²⁰

The Pennsylvania barn was the veritable canvas of agricultural expression. This distinctive architectural structure was unlike anything in

the Old World, and is distinctly American in its evolution and form. Indigenous to Pennsylvania, yet informed by centuries of agricultural production, this barn was developed as a practical solution to the needs of a variety of immigrant groups farming the Pennsylvania countryside.

Drawing upon architectural traditions of Europe, eighteenth-century German and English-speaking immigrants from Central Europe and the British Isles had built a variety of barns in the fertile valleys of Pennsylvania before settling upon a New World form that revolutionized farming in early America.²¹ Standing separate from the home, the Pennsylvania barn was a two-level hybrid engineered for diversified farming operations. Banked into the gently sloping landscape, the lower level consisted of stables for dairy cows and draft horses, and the upper level was divided into bays or work areas dedicated to grain



The Blümlisalp Chalet, constructed in 1571, in Aeschi, Canton Solothurn in Switzerland. A decorated folkhouse, it bears sunburst and rosette patterns, as well as running borders, and the following inscription: “Highest Lord above us, with your graceful hand protect our house and village from sickness, storm, and fire, Amen.” And elsewhere on the same structure: “It is not in the field nor in the trees, but it must germinate in the heart, if one is to become better.” From Gilfian Maurer, *Hausinschriften in Schweitzerland*. Spiez: Verlag G. Maurer AG.

processing and storage, copious space for hay and straw, and the housing and loading of wagons.

This new Pennsylvania barn combined the distinctive cantilevered overhang, or forebay, of Swiss dairy barns, and the convenience of a banked, ramped access to the second story shared by both English and Swiss barns. These two identifying features—the forebay and the bank ramp—served to set the Pennsylvania barn apart from other types of barns in early America. The framing largely followed English patterns, but the form was distinctively Germanic, and often referred to early on as a “Swiss barn” or a “Pennsylvania German bank barn.”

As integrating features, barn stars are not simply decorations applied to the barn, but an important part of the overall architectural plan that visually connects and completes the appearance and function of the structure.

EUROPEAN PRECEDENTS

Considering the point of origin for the ancestors of the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Pfalz or Palatinate region provides surprisingly little or almost no direct correspondences, either in barn types or barn decorations, that compare to Pennsylvania. These European barns differ dramatically from the Pennsylvania barn and are typically neither banked into the earth nor equipped with a cantilevered overhang of the second story. The barns of the Palatinate are constructed largely of stone, and leave no large expanses of wooden siding upon which to decorate.²² Such barns are often connected structurally to the farmhouse as part of a courted farm complex or *Hof*, and clustered in small rural towns, rather than scattered throughout the landscape as in Pennsylvania. As a by-product of the medieval era, rural and urban spaces are blended in



Stars in the Architectural Traditions of the Palatinate in Rhineland-Pfalz and Rhine-Hesse, Germany. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

Clockwise from top left: A door panel carved with six-pointed rosettes, Kaiserslautern; rosettes and a cross on the ventilators of the fifteenth-century St. Martin's Catholic Church, Ober-Olm; 1891 house blessing inscription for Jos[eph] and Katherina (Theobald) Bootz, Oberalben; a rosette on the eave of a half-timbered home in Rommersheim; an arched farmyard gate, featuring a sunrise, Oberalben; a whirling swastika on a home in Rommersheim; a house blessing inscription for Karl and Katherina (Gilcher) Helm, 1883, Oberalben.

the European countryside in a way that is unknown in Pennsylvania, and the barns bear no large murals of stars (or anything else for that matter) to set them apart from other buildings in the landscape.

Nevertheless, the same basic star patterns emerge as a common theme in the Rhineland countryside with a close inspection of the timber framing of homes, painted and carved furniture, the stonework of churches, cemeteries and tombs, and the widespread use of architectural inscriptions. Although smaller and more subtle than the large barn stars of Pennsylvania, these carved, painted, or inscribed stars are often found in significant locations, above doors and windows in centuries-old town houses, carved into arches and fenestration of city gates and churches, inscribed into the eaves or upper gables of timber-frame buildings, or integrated into elaborate house blessings.

But just as elements of the architecture of the Pennsylvania barn can be traced to parts of Switzerland, so too are Swiss alpine farmsteads, called folkhouses,²³ some of the most decorated structures in Europe, combining a wide variety of house inscriptions, geometric motifs, religious emblems, and heraldry, or family crests. This combination of decorative and religious elements produces a decidedly different aesthetic than the barns of Pennsylvania, but the basic star patterns are still present, suggesting the likelihood of a common origin.²⁴

The appearance of celestial elements on architectural inscriptions is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the European connection to Pennsylvania's barn stars. Often featuring stars, dates, the names of the founding family or builder, and mottos or religious poetry, European house and barn inscriptions are the intersection point of the religious and the mundane, and the integration of belief into the domestic and agricultural spheres.

Located above the front door or façade of the house, at the transition between the inner and the

outer worlds, separating the public and private, these inscriptions serve as public dedications of establishment and blessings of the house and occupants. While these blessing inscriptions are diverse in format and structure, common themes are present throughout the tradition, indicating a number of parallel approaches to the dedication of a building. Some of these European blessings are no more than date-stones, capturing the specifics of the time of construction, while others are literary and religious, alternately invoking divine protection or offering some inspirational message for those passing by.

Two excellent examples of these blessing inscriptions, written in tandem with circular star patterns remarkably similar in form and scale to the barn stars of Pennsylvania, adorn the façade of a sixteenth-century Swiss folkhouse in Aeschi, Canton Solothurn. Folkhouses are massive alpine farm dwellings combining the house, barn, stables, and grain storage under one roof for convenience during the harsh winter weather. The Blümlisalp Chalet folkhouse, built in 1571, bears the following prayerful inscription:

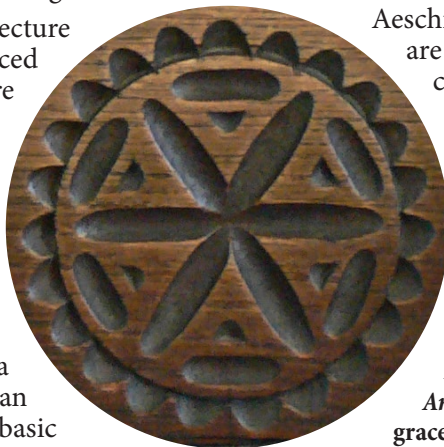
*Herr Höchster über uns mit deiner Gnaden Hand beschutz uns Haus und Dorf vor Krankheit, Sturm und Brand, Amen. (Highest Lord above us, with your graceful hand protect our house and village from sickness, storm, and fire, Amen.)*²⁵

Elsewhere on the same structure, an inspirational inscription is also proudly displayed in letters large enough to be read from a short distance:

Nicht im Feld und auf den Bäumen, in den Herzen muss es keimen, wann es besser werden soll. (It is not in the field nor in the trees, but it must germinate in the heart, if one is to become better.)

These two inscriptions characterize two primary genres of architectural blessing inscriptions in Europe, namely, those which serve to invoke the protection of the divine, and those which serve to inspire righteous living.

Echoing the house-name of the Blümlisalp folkhouse in Aeschi, named after a so-called “floral” peak in the Bernese Alps, its latter message, that



An elaborate rosette on the back of a nineteenth-century chip-carved chair from the Palatinate, from the collection of the Mennonite Research Center, Mennonitische Forschungsstelle Weierhof, Germany.



Above (clockwise from the top left): A spread of circular house and barn blessing plaques — An 1820 barn star from Perry Township, Berks County; an elaborate star from the 1801 Isaac Bieber Homestead, near Kutztown, Maxatawny Township, Berks County; an 1805 star on a Georgian farmhouse, Oley Valley, Berks County; a six-pointed star in plaster on a mill in Northern Lehigh County; a sixteen-pointed star painted on a plaster farmhouse medallion, ca. 1780, Upper Frederick Township, Montgomery County; 1816 Peter Solomon Steckel House, Egypt, North Whitehall Township, Lehigh County; 1819 barn star on the Kistler barn, Greenwich Township, Berks County; an eight-pointed star in plaster on a farmhouse in Upper Macungie, Lehigh County; 1813 Joseph Peter barn, Washington Township, Lehigh County. Bottom: Paired house blessings painted on wooden plaques on the 1819 farmhouse of Johannes and Anna Maria Bolman, and their son Jorg Bolman, Millcreek Township, Lebanon County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

all true betterment must proceed from the heart, makes use of a botanical metaphor, comparing the refinement of the human soul to the blossoming of a flower. This clever connection may also shed light on two large geometric designs situated directly below the gable of the roof, which appear to blend both floral and celestial geometry, just as the two inscriptions alternately appeal to righteous living on earth and the protection of the heavens.

While these two classic examples of European house blessing inscriptions are positively rife with symbolism of the sacred, not all European blessings offer such detailed explanations to accompany the geometric visual depictions of floral and celestial patterns found with them. Just like Pennsylvania's barn stars, some of the alpine Swiss decorated folkhouses feature large star or floral patterns with no accompanying text to lend meaning to the art. Nevertheless, such stars are often placed in locations that suggest a silent blessing to the structure, such as under the roof overhang or at the upper gable apex, simulating the starry heavens above.

Similar uses of stars are found in the alpine architecture of Switzerland and Austria, and along the border with northern Italy, as well as in Alsace, France, bordering the Rhine to the west, and across the Rhine in the Black Forest of Germany. While no one region of Europe can claim to be the single point of origin of the Pennsylvania Dutch culture, such is also the case for the Pennsylvania barn star. Just as the Pennsylvania Dutch proceed from a wide variety of European roots to form a distinctly American culture, currents of artistic expressions from many regions poured into Pennsylvania to create new artistic traditions in America.

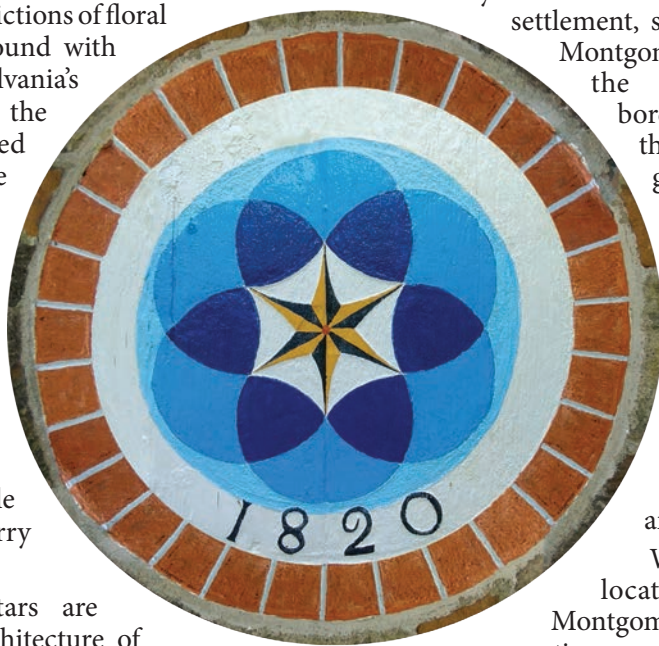
Above: An elaborate house blessing plaque dated 1820, with painted faux-brick border from North Whitehall Township, Lehigh County. Courtesy of Eric Claypoole.

ARCHITECTURAL BLESSINGS & THE EARLIEST BARN STARS

Among the earliest expressions of Pennsylvania's folk art stars still extant in today's landscape are those which appear in the domestic and sacred architecture of the first communities established by the Pennsylvania Dutch in the southeastern part of the state.

In a similar manner to European blessing inscriptions, early examples of painted architectural medallions emblazoned with stars appear on early architecture along corridors of early settlement, stretching from Northern Montgomery County clear to the Blue Mountain ridge bordering Berks County to the north. Featuring colorful geometric patterns in combination with early dates, initials, or even full names, these early structures run the gamut of architectural expression—everything from houses built in the late eighteenth century, to early nineteenth-century houses, barns, and mills.²⁶

With elaborate examples located in Berks, Lehigh, Montgomery, and Northampton counties, some of the most notable of these star medallions occur on English Georgian farmhouses on the upper gable apex. One of the earliest of these Georgian houses, located in Upper Frederick Township, Montgomery County, features two sixteen-pointed stars with split points in contrasting green and white painted on plastered medallions on either of the upper gables. While no dates or names can be found on this particular dwelling, which dates to the 1780s, a central circle in the middle of the star is large enough to have featured a date. This is comparable to another star found on a nearby barn in Douglass Township, which bears the



remnants of a six-pointed rosette with a central circle of the same size, inside of which is a date from the 1780s that is weathered beyond full legibility. This latter example occurs on an original wooden date-board set into the masonry of the gable end of an English bank barn, which was modified with the addition of a forebay to match the local Pennsylvania barns favored by the Pennsylvania Dutch.

In both of these early Montgomery County examples, it is clear that Pennsylvania Dutch people created a hybrid of English architectural styles and Germanic features, reinforcing the notion that the culture was formed from a culmination of Pennsylvania's diverse communities. These early forerunners to the barn stars must be considered in this light—not as a transplant of European artistry, but as something formed of new American identities.

Dozens of these medallion plaques exist, with scattered examples in remnants along the Kings Highway in Lehigh County, in the Oley Valley of Berks County, and along the base of the Blue Mountain, stretching throughout Northampton, and Northern Lehigh and Berks counties.

A wide variety of such inscriptions in alternate formats can be found on the gables of early nineteenth-century barns and houses throughout Pennsylvania. These include semi-circular date boards featuring images of the rising sun in Northern Lehigh, arched and rectangular plaques presenting stars and floral motifs along the border of Berks and Lebanon Counties, as well as semi-circular or oval-shaped plaques displaying images of stars or the Federal Eagle in the corridor of the Perkiomen Valley spanning Berks, Lehigh, Montgomery, and Bucks counties.

Some of these plaques and their dated inscriptions highlight the sense of pride of ownership present in the decades immediately following the Revolution, and the emergence of a new American identity in the era of the Early Republic. One such pair of house blessing inscriptions records the names of revolutionary

soldier Johannes Bolman and his wife Anna Maria Bolman, who settled near Millbach on the border of Lancaster and Lebanon counties following the receipt of Johannes's compensation after the war. This property was established for the purpose of sustaining each subsequent generation, and Johannes and Anna Maria's son Jorg's name appeared on a plaque adjacent to the one recording his parents' names. On each of these plaques, flowers and rosette stars connected by vines burst forth from an urn, a symbol of growth, emergence, and renewal, paralleling the intentions of the house blessing plaques.

The most celebrated of all of these architectural medallions is the 1819 barn blessing attributed to the Kistler family of Greenwich Township, Berks County.²⁷ This painted wooden medallion is in all respects a highly developed forerunner to the distinctive star patterns in Northern Berks. Like its peers throughout Lehigh, Northampton, and Montgomery, it was painted on a medallion composed of two wide boards and set into a circular recess in the original masonry. There it was anchored with hand-wrought nails to hidden "sleeper" boards in the recess behind the medallion. A six-pointed star with



This semi-circular house blessing board was salvaged from the upper gable end of a stone farmhouse built for John and Lydia Anders in 1849, and originally located near Towamencin, in Lower Salford Township, Montgomery County. Courtesy of the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center. Glencairn staff photo.

a central pinwheel painted in the alternating colors of yellow and green, framed within a border of three concentric circles, bears a striking resemblance to the classic barn stars painted with eight, twelve, and six points throughout the region. An inscription fills the spaces between each star point with initials and a date, reading "S K 1819 M K"—honoring the husband and wife who established the farm property. Although it is possible that the initials were for Samuel J. and Maria Elizabeth (Ladich) Kistler, buried at the nearby Jerusalem Union Cemetery in Stony Run, records from this time are scant and cannot be confirmed.²⁸ Nevertheless, this inscription outlines the function of the earliest barn stars in the region as a colorful means to commemorate the establishment of a property.

The evidence of dozens of these earliest barn stars suggests that they were mostly produced within the half-century following the American Revolution and no examples are known to exist after 1840. Perhaps this is because these early architectural blessings were entirely dependent upon the stone construction of the upper gable as a place to anchor the decorative plaques, and when architectural forms changed, the format and style of the architectural blessing was adapted into the barn stars we recognize today.

SACRED ARCHITECTURE

Even earlier than the oldest examples of house and barn blessings, images of stars and flowers emerge from the landscape as central symbols of sacred architecture. Especially among Protestant congregations, celestial images served as focal points of early churches constructed as meetinghouses in the Georgian and Federal styles, where crosses were not used to identify their Christian faith. For these early American congregations, many of whom sought to distance themselves from the cathedrals of the Roman Catholic establishment in Old Europe, the cross was thought to represent one's internal faith journey, but was intentionally avoided as an emblem of the faith.²⁹ Instead, a number of early Pennsylvania churches featured six-pointed rosette stars on the structures in strikingly prominent locations.

Among these early churches are the 1767 New Hanover Lutheran Church in Montgomery County, constructed for the earliest German Lutheran congregation in the United States, organized in 1700.³⁰ The building features a six-pointed rosette on a carved keystone above the main entrance, along with an inscription honoring the names of the builders. In a similar manner, the 1806 Swamp Union Church of Reinholds, Lancaster County, features a

series of stones along the upper eave of the façade, listing the names of the church builders, masons, and carpenters, along with a series of rosettes.³¹

Within this particular context the rosette and the keystone suggest a thoughtful, intentional, religious significance, although no records exist to verify the original builders' reasoning. According to Christian tradition, the keystone itself represents Christ, as the Book of Isaiah pronounces: "Behold, I place a stone in Zion."³² Psalm 118 describes "the stone the builders rejected is become the chief corner stone," interpreted by Christians as prophecy of the coming of Christ as the foundation of the church.³³

The rosette takes this significance a step further, evoking the star that signified the birth of Christ in Bethlehem to the Magi,³⁴ and again in the Book of Revelation: "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches: I am

the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."³⁵

Alternately, the form of the rosette has also been compared to the image of the lily,³⁶ which graced the pillars of the Temple of King Solomon, and elsewhere refers to the renewal of the world by the coming of the Messiah: "I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon."³⁷ The

builders of the New Hanover Lutheran Church were likely familiar with these popular biblical passages.

In a similar manner in Central Pennsylvania the Great Conewago Presbyterian Congregation established Henderson's Meetinghouse for Scotch-Irish families and some Pennsylvania Dutch who settled in Adams County, and the structure included a large slate medallion featuring a six-pointed rosette along with the date of 1787 and the name of Joseph Henderson, the founder. The prominence of the rosette in the dedication stone suggests that the Calvinists may have ascribed similar meaning to the rosette.



A six-pointed rosette on the carved keystone above the door of the 1767 New Hanover Lutheran Church, serving the oldest continuous German Lutheran congregation in America, located in New Hanover Township, Montgomery County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

Stars were also prominent in the churches of Europe, where many chapels and country churches were painted with star-ceilings depicting the canopy of the heavens complete with planets and constellations, as well as the sun and moon. These star-ceilings suggested to those worshipping within that the sanctuary mirrored the divine organization of the cosmos, as the creation and dwelling place of God. Star-ceilings were also documented in Pennsylvania churches, such as the Bern Reformed Church of Bern Township, Berks County; however, none of the original ceilings survive to this day.

Later Federal style churches of the early nineteenth century continued the tradition of integrating star patterns into sacred architecture. The 1815 Belleman's Union Church in Mohrsville, Berks County, once featured six-pointed rosettes in the configuration of clear glass windows on the upper gable ends of the meetinghouse.³⁸ Similarly, sunbursts once accented the gable windows of the 1805 Bindnagel's Lutheran Church of Palmyra, in Lebanon County. These elements were the standards of Protestant houses of worship up until the Victorian era, when the Gothic Revival reaffirmed the cathedral as a desirable architectural form and the cross once again returned to church architecture, and gradually to rural Pennsylvania communities.

One might easily observe that some of these expressions are in keeping with marks and ornamentation favored by the building trades, and that stone masons and woodworkers frequently embellished focal points of buildings or used geometric designs in their maker's marks. However, one need only look to the churchyards and cemeteries to see that such imagery extended beyond the realm of the trades and featured prominently in the symbolism of early gravestones, which were equally an expression of sacred, consecrated space.

GRAVESTONES

These early gravestones commonly record the biographical descriptions of the lives of the faithful departed, including the dates of birth and death, the age at the time of death, as well as the names of spouses or parents, the number of children, or even an occupation or locations of birth and death. These life stories, provided in more or less detail, are framed with varying degrees of ornamentation and religious symbolism.

Again, the earliest Protestant gravestones deliberately avoided the use of the cross,³⁹ and instead a diverse range of images appeared to serve as reflections of mortality and rebirth. Angels and winged busts suggested the messengers of heaven and the passage of the spirit of the deceased to the afterlife. Hearts depicted the seat of the human soul and its capacity to experience both mortal and divine love, while the skull, crossed bones, the hourglass, and the sickle represented the death of the body, and the harvesting of the soul.⁴⁰

Many of these symbolic images were pictorial reminders of scriptural passages commonly read at the graveside, such as the image of the crown featured in the comforting words of Christ from the Revelation of John, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life,"⁴¹ or the gates of heaven.⁴² For the vast majority of gravestone symbols, biblical verses both inspired and reinforced the use of particular images, establishing a standard of meaning with the potential to be easily identified and widely recognized.

Above: The elaborately carved dedication stone featuring a central rosette and an inscription of the 1787 Joseph Henderson Meeting House, serving the Great Conewago Presbyterian congregation in Adams County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.



Many early stones feature images of flowers, especially three blossoms rising out of a funerary urn. This particular motif is commonly accepted as a symbol of resurrection, and repetitions of three invoke the Trinity. But floral patterns as a whole have a wide range of possible interpretations, including the frailty of mortal life as described in the Psalms, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field;”⁴³ or represent Christ, the Messiah as described by the Prophet Hosea, “he shall blossom like the lily,” or as the Bridegroom in the Song of Solomon: “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.”⁴⁴

These carved images of flowers also suggest the earthly realm of mortals, where in some gravestones the flowers are depicted at ground level, with a shining star above. One such gravestone, in the cemetery of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Manheim, Lancaster County, was carved for Rosina McGartney, infant daughter of John and Elizabeth McGartney, who was born and died on the same day: May 27, 1784.⁴⁵ This tragedy inspired the carved image on the stone, depicting the soul of the departed little girl under the illumination of a single star from above and surrounded by flowers

below, suggesting her soul’s passage from the earthly realm to the celestial realm of the heavens.

The stone of Rosina McGartney was carved by a prolific anonymous stonecarver of Northern Lancaster, County, who created scores of gravestones throughout the Cocalico and Brubaker Valleys. His specialty was the image of the winged Sophia, a symbolic representation of the spirit of wisdom favored by some Pietist groups in Pennsylvania, especially the community at the Ephrata Cloister. The carver’s Sophia is often crowned with a star, a blossom, or a flame.⁴⁶

However, in some cases images of winged human busts represent the soul’s transformation, as in certain stones in the Cocalico Valley of Lancaster,⁴⁷ which depict a bust of the deceased on the west side of the stone, and the same bust, complete with wings, on the east side. These directions align with the most common orientation for gravestones: facing east, in the direction of Jerusalem and the rising of the sun, echoing the symbolism of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Carvings of rising suns are also common, as well as images of the waning moon, a symbol of the mortal soul committed to the earth.⁴⁸ Stars and rosettes are among the most common gravestone images, depicting the beacons of the heavens, and symbols of divine order.



Above: Early Gravestone of Rosina McGartney, Courtesy of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Manheim, Lancaster County. This intricately carved headstone reads: “Departed this life, Rosina McGartney, the daughter of John McGartney & Elizabeth his wife, born and departed May 27, 1784.” This tragic inscription is now only partially legible, having been worn away by the elements over time.

Rarely do such illustrated stones offer an inscription to elaborate upon the beliefs which undergird the images. One such stone, at Emanuel Lutheran Church in Brickerville, depicts a personified image of the sun and moon and two rosettes carved in relief, along with a series of incised stars, and the English-language inscription of lyrics by the Congregational hymnodist Isaac Watts:

God my redeemer lives,
Who often from the skies,
Looks down, and
Members all my dust,
Till he shall bid me rise.⁴⁹

This inscription confirms that such celestial images are neither whimsical nor merely polite decorations, but meaningful iconography describing the infinite heavens as the dwelling place of the divine and part of a sacred, ordered cosmos.

FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE

This symbolism extends beyond the artistry of churchyard gravestones and equally embraces the highly embellished, formal documents celebrating birth and baptism at the very beginning of life. Featuring elaborate images of stars, angelic messengers, birds, and floral patterns, these illuminated certificates, or *Geburts- und Taufscheine* (Birth and Baptismal certificates), celebrate new life with depictions of the heavens and the natural world. Such documents are part of an art form recognized in the present day as *Fraktur*, named

after the particular style of blackletter calligraphic writing called *Frakturschrift*.

The images accompanying these calligraphic documents have received much attention over the past century as manifestations of art poised at the intersection between symbolic, social, and religious narratives. Although *Fraktur* scribes and artists did not always provide overt visual and textual relationships, certain examples provide powerful reminders of the way that such illustrations frame the sacred experience with images of the natural world and the heavens above—two essential components of a divinely created universe.

A particularly elaborate example that successfully integrates image and text into a coherent inspirational message is the certificate commemorating the 1771 birth and baptism of Johann Adam Laux, son of Peter and Cathrina Laux, produced on September 3, 1773 and attributed to Johannes Mayer of Bedminster Township, Bucks County.⁵⁰ The central motif of the document depicts the face of a clock articulated with Roman numerals and a twelve-pointed rosette star, flanked on either side by verses from the Book of Psalms: “My time stands in thy hands,”⁵¹ and “Behold, my days are as a handbreadth to thee.”⁵² Below the clock stands an urn from which spring forth blossoms.



Bookplate and Birth Record for Marya Wenger
FFLP B-125, Rare Book Department, Free Library of Philadelphia.
This highly embellished bookplate commemorates the birth of Marya Wenger on “the 6th of February, in the year 1845.” A nine-pointed star, hand-painted in alternating shades of red, yellow, and blue, is enwrapped in a floral vine. This illuminated inscription was pasted onto the inside cover of Marya Wenger’s New Testament, printed by Scheffer & Beck of Harrisburg in 1848. Testaments and prayer books are among the most personalized religious items, strengthening their role as tools of daily devotions.

Like early gravestones that carefully record the dates of one’s birth and death, and a reckoning of the age of the deceased person in years, months, and days, the Adam Laux birth and baptismal provides a reflection on the



Birth and baptismal certificate for the 1771 birth of Johann Adam Laux, son of Peter and Cathrina Laux, created in 1773 by Johannes Mayer of Bedminster Township, Bucks County. Whereabouts unknown; from William J. Hinke's *History of the Tohickon Union Church*, 1925.

ephemeral duration of a human life, demonstrating the special emphasis of time in sacred material culture. Although the certificate provides only the year of birth, many such documents record not only the day, month, and year of birth, but also the sign of the zodiac, and occasionally the ruling planet or phase of the moon under which the child was born.⁵³

A birth and baptismal certificate for Benjamin Meyer (1800-1824), son of Heinrich and Mary Meyer of Miles Township, Centre County, records his birth “in the year 1800, on the 26th of August around 4 o'clock in the morning, under the Sign of the Scorpion.”⁵⁴ The celestial images of the six-pointed rosette stars are notable, considering the emphasis placed upon the birth of the child under the constellation of Scorpio. While this is a common feature of both printed and handwritten certificates, it is unusual that this detail is given more prominence in the limited space of the central circle of the document than even “the father and mother of

this child;” they are listed as the baptismal sponsors, but their specific names are absent.

The care and detail displayed in these records of human life serves as a reminder, not only of the particulars of one's birth, but also the brevity of life. In addition, this later consideration is meant to inspire the living to consider the spiritual condition of their lives, and examine their deeds and accomplishments. Printed birth and baptismal certificates from the mid-nineteenth century, produced by the thousands throughout Pennsylvania, reflected the shortness of life in these common lines of poetry:

Our wasting lives grow shorter still,
As months and days increase,
And every beating pulse we tell,
Leaves but the number less.

The year rolls round and steals away,
The breath that first it gave,
Whate'er we do, whate'er we be
We are traveling to the grave.



Birth and baptismal certificate for Benjamin Meyer, giving the precise hour and sign of the zodiac under which the child was born on August 26, 1800 at 4 o'clock in the morning, under the sign of the scorpion, in Miles Township, Centre County. Courtesy of the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center. Glencairn staff photo.

Infinite joy or endless woe
 Attends on every breath,
 And yet how unconcern'd we go,
 Upon the brink of death!

Waken, O Lord! Our drowsy sense,
 To walk this dangerous road;
 And if our souls are hurried hence,
 May they be found with God.⁵⁵

While these reflections may at first appear to be a morbid intrusion into a document celebrating new birth, for centuries among the Pennsylvania Dutch, the anticipation of death began at the very beginning of life, when infant and childhood mortality was an all too common experience; death claimed equally the young and old, the rich and poor, without prejudice for one's achievements or station in life.

An elaborate barn blessing near Sinking Spring, Berks County, that echoes these sacred sentiments was created in 1802 by the stone-mason Heinrich Iertz (Hertz). It reads: "God can build and destroy.

He can give and he can take, to each as it pleases him." The blessing inscription is enclosed in an arched cartouche, topped with a simple pattern composed of four whirling rain-drop shapes.⁵⁶

This emblem was once one of the most popular images in Pennsylvania Dutch folk art, and featured prominently on the barns of Montgomery, Lehigh, and Bucks counties.⁵⁷ An ancient symbol associated with good luck, the swastika comes from the Sanskrit word for "bringer of good fortune," and was used widely across the world by many cultures throughout the millennia. This pattern was used widely in Pennsylvania, and throughout the United States, long before the European adaptation of the motif as a German military symbol for the Third Reich during the Second World War. Nevertheless, this particular curved, lobed pattern has persisted in many variations as a barn decoration, as its gentle appearance suggests the opening of a flower, the turning of a fly-wheel, and the sun's passage of time throughout the ages.

This whirling wheel parallels the biblical reflections on mortality and the frailty of human endeavors, presenting an important aspect of the Pennsylvania Dutch folk-cultural worldview in which the interrelation of life and death, heaven and earth, the temporal and the eternal, are all in the hands of the divine creator.

DOMESTIC & CELESTIAL

While various forms of celestial symbolism are common, and perhaps even expected, in both religious art and sacred objects, the Pennsylvania Dutch applied the same motifs on even the most mundane of objects. Artists and craftspeople carved, embroidered, wove, painted, and inscribed the same celestial patterns on decorated chests, butter-molds, coverlets, spoon-racks, spice-boxes, cheese-presses, tape-looms, rifles, powder horns, musical instruments, trivets, and wood-working tools. While this form of common, everyday artistic expression could at first appear to suggest that such common motifs held little or no discernible meaning to the makers and owners of such everyday objects, instead such decorated objects communicate a remarkable sense of craftsmanship, and thoughtful appreciation of the mundane that is essential to the Pennsylvania Dutch culture. This certainly does not indicate that each and every object in

the home was somehow elevated above the experience of daily life. Instead, it suggests the opposite, that the stars and their artistic representations were a part of everyday life, and that every aspect of life was equally deserving of their celestial presence—both sacred and mundane.

In each of these instances, the star motifs are not merely placeholders, but evidence of folk art and belief in process. While previous generations of scholars have pointed to the diverse application of celestial motifs throughout the culture as an indication that the designs were purely decorative, with no inherent meaning,⁵⁸ on the contrary, the presence of the stars throughout even the most mundane contexts could suggest that the stars played an important role in folk art as a form of social ritual. Celestial motifs were present at an overwhelming majority of life's transitions in early Pennsylvania, whether they are found on a decorated cradle at the beginning of life; on a hand-illuminated certificate for the baptism of a child; on a decorated blanket chest given to a young bride at her wedding; on an inscribed blessing stone of a new home; on the façade of a well-maintained barn; or on the headstones of the faithful departed. These celestial images followed early Pennsylvanians through life, offering many layers of meaning to common human experiences.

Interestingly, while many of these traditional motifs are commonly identified as “stars,” it is rarely considered that the geometric expression of a star is quite different from the visual form of an actual star, which appears as a point of light in the celestial sphere. This type of geometric pattern can therefore be called abstract, as opposed to realistic.



Barn Blessing in Plaster, Photo by Guy F. Reinert, ca. 1950.
Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

This elaborate barn blessing features floral motifs and a whirling flywheel pattern, along with a German inscription: “1802. The Lord can build and he can destroy; he can give and he can take to each as it pleases him. Heinrich Hertz, Stone Mason.” Although the barn structure still stands today, the German inscription and symbolic elements are no longer visible.

ASTRONOMY & THE ALMANAC

As with many agricultural societies, the Pennsylvania Dutch possess a well-developed system of beliefs concerning the movements of the heavens and their effects on earthly processes, as well as on botanical, animal, and human affairs. While the bulk of these beliefs in Pennsylvania proceed from the European traditions of the agricultural almanac, these conceptions have been liberally blended with religious attitudes. Thus, the stars in their courses, along with the rising and setting of the sun and the phases of the moon, were not only regarded as the clearest indicators of the passage of time, but were emblematic of the belief in a stable, ordered, sacred universe.⁵⁹

The progression of the sun, moon, and stars are a central feature in the agricultural almanacs still used in the present day, where celestial

activities are charted and interpreted for their influence on the mechanics of earthly life. Each almanac is essentially an annual household reference booklet, and includes the liturgical church calendar of saints' days and festivals, charts of the lunar phases, the day-to-day progression of the zodiac constellations and planets, as well as calculations for the appearance of comets, eclipses, and other astronomical phenomena. This information was once used to orchestrate the activities of daily life into a meaningful and coherent whole, and the almanac is still used by some farmers and gardeners today.⁶⁰

Whether in planting or harvesting, felling trees or tilling the soil, baking bread or fermenting vinegar, breeding or slaughtering livestock, bearing children or getting married, there were believed to be appropriate days of the week, times of the month, phases of the moon, saints' days, or alignments of celestial bodies which would either positively or negatively affect the outcome of life events.⁶¹



Above: Chip-Carved Mattress Paddle, Nineteenth Century. Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

An elaborately carved wooden paddle used for preparing and smoothing a rye-straw mattress tick on a nineteenth-century rope bed. Such highly embellished objects were typically carved during winter evenings and presented as gifts for sweethearts or loved ones. Some of these objects were dated and initialed to demonstrate a sense of pride in craftsmanship, while others, like the paddle, are anonymous and without attribution.

Below: Butter molds were once common everyday objects used by rural households where butter was made by hand. After the butter was churned, it was stored in one-pound blocks that were portioned using butter molds, which often bore carved geometric, botanical, or animal motifs that would leave a distinctive mark on the butter. This was not only a fancy presentation of the butter for household use, but also for sale, as a profitable dairy product, and decorations enhanced its salability. Left: A butter mold with a whirling swastika pattern. Heilman Collection of Patrick J. Donmoyer. Right: Eight-pointed star butter mold. Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University. Glencairn staff photo.



Clockwise from the left: Woven coverlet decorated with stars and floral motifs, ca. 1830. Hamburg, Berks County.

A late nineteenth-century tin dust pan, featuring a six-pointed rosette pattern with split, lobed star points and small cross motifs between each point, just like some local barn stars.



A nineteenth-century wooden canteen inscribed with six-pointed rosettes carved from a single block of wood, with pairs of stars on either end.

Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.



This system was an attempt to harmonize the progression of human life with the progression of the heavens, and was believed to be the manifestation and visible order of the divine will.

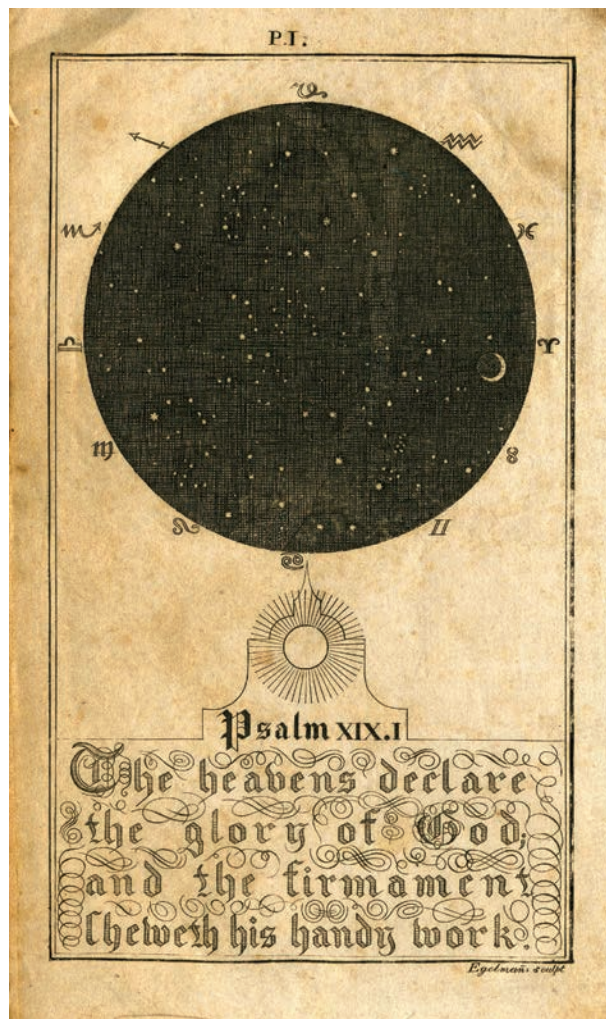
Almanac traditions were followed to different degrees by different families in a way that was by no means uniform. However, the system of beliefs was so firmly established that the agricultural almanac was one of the most common works of printed literature found in the Pennsylvania Dutch home, second only to the German family Bible.⁶² While to modern audiences, these two books may appear to represent opposing systems of thought and belief, on the contrary, it was biblical literature itself that undergirded the belief in the efficacy of the almanac tradition.

According to the Book of Genesis, it was on the fourth day of creation that the creator said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them serve as signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the Earth."⁶³ This message is continued in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which explains, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and

a time to build up..."⁶⁴ The Old Testament is not the only place in which the celestial sphere is celebrated as a means of understanding the will of the divine. In the New Testament, the birth of Jesus Christ is signaled by a star in the east,⁶⁵ and in the Book of Luke, the second coming of the Messiah is said to be heralded by astronomical phenomena: "There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the Earth dismay among nations... for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."⁶⁶

In all of these biblical passages, the stars in the sky are viewed as a constant, ever-present reminder of divine order, only changeable under the most momentous of circumstances.

It is through this concept of agricultural and religious order that the significance of the stars in Pennsylvania Dutch culture can begin to be understood, not merely as points of light in a distant sky, but as powerful forces which were believed to govern even the most minute aspects of life. At the same time that celestial folk art illustrations connect a people with their sense of placement in the cosmos, in a similar manner, traditional folk art connects a culture with its ancestral legacy. The repeated use of folk art motifs over many generations creates a sense of continuity in the aesthetic experience of the domestic and sacred spheres of life. This sense of chronology not only applies to the



"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handywork"—an engraving by Carl Frederick Egelman (1782-1860) of Mount Penn, Berks County, and the frontispiece of *The Complete Explanation of the Calendar, with a Comprehensive Instruction of the Heavenly Bodies*, by the Rev. E. L. Walz, Lutheran minister of Hamburg, Berks County, printed in Reading by Johann Ritter in 1830. Heilman Collection of Patrick J. Donmoyer.



Left: Cover engraving of *Egelman's Improved Almanac*, by Carl Friederick Egelman (1782-1860) of Mount Penn, Berks County, the foremost astronomical calculator of Pennsylvania, whose tables and engravings of the movements of the heavenly bodies were featured in annual farmer's almanacs throughout the state. It depicts the phases of the moon, the planets, the signs of the zodiac, the seasons, as well as Psalm 19 in German: "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament sheweth his handywork." Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Folklife Society Archive, Myrin Library, Ursinus College.

Opposite: A heavily used *Egelman's Improved Almanac for the Year of Our Lord 1846*, with the original leather loop still intact, commonly used for hanging the almanac on a nail by the kitchen door for ease of daily reference. Heilman Collection of Patrick J. Donmoyer, Gift of Reginald Good.

intergenerational use of such traditional motifs, but also reflects the cradle-to-grave application of folk art over the span of a human life in domestic and sacred material culture. The reference to time, therefore, is an important element in the interpretation of celestial symbolism.

The order and progression of the heavens is essential to the human understanding and experience of the passage of time. According to the Lutheran Minister E. L. Walz of Hamburg, Berks County, in his 1830 astronomical treatise entitled, *Complete Explanation of the Calendar, with a Comprehensive Instruction of the Heavenly Bodies*, the celestial division of time "brings light and order in all the multitudinous and the innumerable relationships and operations, with which the people of Earth are interconnected."⁶⁷ This belief was well established among the Pennsylvania Dutch, as it relates to external physical affairs, as well as communal and personal spiritual life.

The frontis engraving opposite Rev. Walz's title page depicts the celestial sphere, complete with the moon, stars, and the milky-way, surrounded by the signs of the zodiac, and the sun shining forth as a beacon from a stylized church steeple. The opening

verse of the nineteenth Psalm of David accompanies the image: "The Heavens declare the Glory of God and the Firmament sheweth his handywork."⁶⁸

This engraving is the work of Carl Friedrich Egelman (1782-1860) of Reading, Berks County, the foremost astronomical calculator of Pennsylvania, whose tables and engravings of the movements of the heavenly bodies were featured in annual farmer's almanacs throughout the state of Pennsylvania and Maryland, as well as his own *Egelman's Improved Almanac* published in Reading, where he lived on Mount Penn.⁶⁹ A master engraver, Egelman's work combined astronomical and religious imagery, and the cover of his almanac featured an engraving showing a cosmological diagram, including the phases of the moon, the sun and planets, the signs of the zodiac, the months and seasons, as well as the German text from Psalm 19, used as the motto of the calendar. Egelman depicted himself in the very center with the horn of a messenger, proclaiming his astronomical observations for the glory of his divine creator.⁷⁰

The prolific Egelman also produced printed birth and baptismal certificates, an extensive series of engravings for a manual for penmanship instruction,⁷¹ and penned poetry that was both

religious and astronomical. In his German-language poem, *Empfindungen eines Astronomen* (*Sentiments of an Astronomer*), which appeared in *Der Neue Readinger Calender* (*The New Reading Almanac*) of 1822, Egelman ponders the wonders of the cosmos:

With what almighty, infinite Force
Were the planets and stars,
Celestial works of eternal space,
Brought out of the dark night into orbit?

Who maintains the order of the
radiant stars?
Who guides the suns at wondrous
distance?
Who restrains the orbit of the
laughing moon?
If thou, almighty Creator, did not
there abide?

Who contains the turbulent seas?
Who confines the hordes
of preying beasts to the
wilderness?
Who provides nourishment,
who gives bread for all?
Who defends from the
dangers of abject
poverty?

Who endows humanity
with the capacity
to think?

From whom proceeds
reason, and who
can guide it?

And who maintains
the scales of all things in balance?
Thou dost, O Creator, and thine is
the kingdom.⁷²

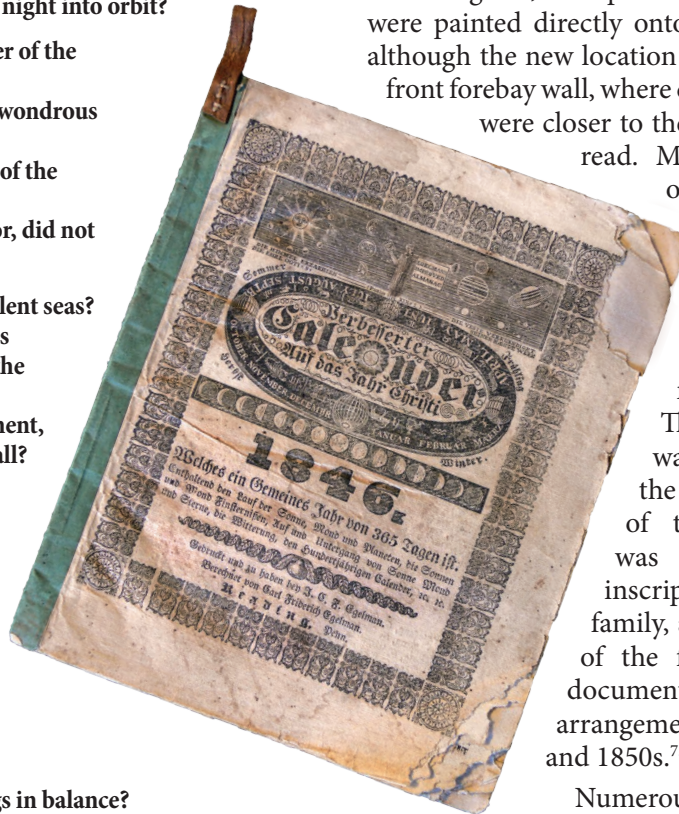
It is notable that Egelman's period of influence as an astronomer, almanac maker, and artist—roughly 1820-1860—coincides with precisely the time and place when celestial images were widespread in the traditional arts, when geometric representations of the stars became a popular art form in Berks County. While likely mere coincidence, this suggests perhaps that religious and folk-cultural interest in the movements of the heavens, and the traditional farmer's almanac, were at a high point among the rural Pennsylvania Dutch at that time.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRADITION

Around 1840, a general shift in construction methods occurred throughout the region, when the abundance of cheaply-produced wooden siding enabled the widespread construction of barns with framed gables rather than stone. In the absence of a stone gable, star patterns and date inscriptions were painted directly onto the siding of the barn, although the new location of preference was on the front forebay wall, where details like names or dates

were closer to the viewer and far easier to read. Matching the dimensions of this new location, the arrangement required two, three, or more stars to adequately divide the expanse of the forebay siding into manageable visual spaces. The date of the structure was often recorded below the star in the very center of the barn, where there was sufficient area for the inscription of the name of the family, and sometimes the name of the farm itself. The earliest documented structures with this arrangement dates from the 1840s and 1850s.⁷³

Numerous barns of the mid-nineteenth century in Berks and Lehigh are adorned with three or more stars across the front of the barn, in concert with other painted elements that accent the architectural form of the structure. These include decorative borders on the bottom edge of the siding, or in vertical stripes along the edges and dividing the front siding into equal areas, as is common along the border of Western Berks and Lebanon. Most common of all are the painted outlines around doors and windows, in most cases crowned with a semi-circular arc or half of a barn star, illustrating the rising sun below



the dome of the heavens. On the bank side of the barn, small stars or even hearts are clustered above the large wagon doors, and vertical stripes outline the dimensions of the entrances.

It was in the mid-nineteenth century that these painted arrangements became somewhat standardized in particular regions by certain artists supervising painting crews. Painting crews, under the direction of master painters, were responsible for painting the interiors of homes as well as barns, and the barn stars were part of the total package that was offered for the farm property.⁷⁴

It is clear that the notion of commercially available paints did not enter into the equation until far later. Instead, pigments could be obtained locally or ordered and mixed by hand with boiled linseed oil for exterior paints, or milk-based casein paints for interiors. In fact, some artists mixed their own paints well into the twentieth century, knowing that their tried-and-true recipes were likely to outlast anything purchased commercially.⁷⁵

Unlike the painting crews of today, which are able to prepare and paint a barn with commercial paints in a matter of days, painting crews of the nineteenth century spent time preparing the paints as well as the surfaces that were to be painted. No ledgers of barn star painters from the nineteenth century are known to exist which could help to illuminate the particulars of time, materials, and process employed to decorate a barn.

However, one particular barn painter of the early twentieth century, Milton J. Hill (1887-1972)

of Virginville, kept a ledger that outlined his hourly project schedules, his paint pigments, and precisely how long it took him to paint the stars. Hill's father, John M. Hill (1855-1933), was also a painter, specializing in houses, barns, and even barn stars, although little is known of his work. Milton learned his trade from his father, who worked with him (and eventually under him) well into the 1920s, creating a seamless continuation of tradition in the family.

In 1912, Hill and another painter collectively spent 411 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours to paint a house, a barn, and a series of stars on the barn of George Hoch.⁷⁶ According to his ledger entry from 1912, Hill painted the house and barn from May 23 to June 8 and, beginning on June 10, he spent 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours starting the series of stars. On June 11 and 12, Hill and his assistant each put in 22 hours painting the stars, for a total of 52 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours. After 42 additional hours for cleanup and finishing work on the barn, the job was complete. Hill was paid 15 cents per hour, and his partner only 10 cents, with each of them receiving a total amount of \$30.90 and \$20.57 for 206 and 205 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours respectively!

Although adjustment for inflation suggests that their wages would be worth

a combined total of \$1,300 today,⁷⁷ it is still easy to see that labor was comparatively inexpensive in those days, allowing for artists to produce colorful barn paintings at rates far below the labor of today. The painters were compensated only \$7.03 for the painting of the stars, which amounts to an adjusted \$182.43 in today's currency. If Milton painted a total of 4 stars on the barn (an average in his



After 1840, when many barns were built with no stone gable to anchor a circular medallion to mark the date, artists painted these dated barn stars on the front and center of the forebay siding. Upper Milford, Lehigh County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

immediate community in Virginville), each star was valued at \$1.75 each.

The inexpensive nature of this form of art made it easily within the means of farmers of moderate income. Milton Hill recommended that his stars be repainted every ten years or so, allowing for a steady flow of work during the decades that he painted throughout the region.

Although it is uncertain how many barns Milton Hill painted over the course of his long career, his work and legacy provided a continued folk-cultural narrative consistent with the experience of earlier generations. Milton asserted that his paintings were “stars”—*Schtanne* in his Pennsylvania Dutch mother tongue—artistic representations of the heavens.

AN ARTIST’S TALE

A lover of the stars, artist Milton J. Hill began his career painting barn stars at the age of 14 under the mentorship of his father, John M. Hill, who paid him the generous going-rate of ten cents per hour, and asked him only to furnish his own paint.⁷⁸ This of course required Milton to learn the art of mixing his own colors from linseed oil and commercial pigments, rather than the loathsome ready-mixed “patent” paints that performed unpredictably even in the best of circumstances.

In 1902 Milton painted the very first star which would later become his signature pattern on the barn of Samuel Hepner in Windsor Castle, Berks County. This “Hill Star,” as it would later be known, was unlike

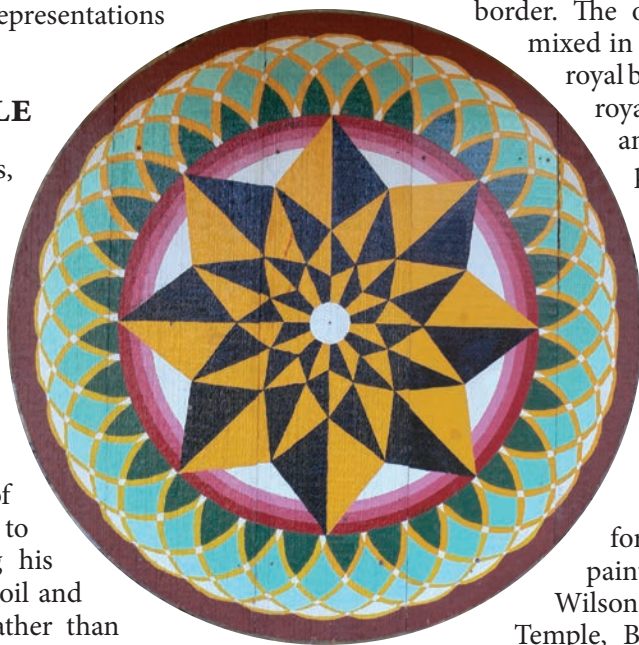
Above: A Milton Hill star re-creation, painted on weathered barn wood at the Kutztown Folk Festival in 2016, modeled after a star from the Leiby Homestead in Virginville, by barn star artist Milton J. Hill (1887-1972) of Virginville, Berks County, ca. 1940. Hill began painting this star pattern on barns in 1902 at the age of 14. This pattern incorporates 10 different colors, and includes the bold interlaced border for which he was best known. Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

anything else in the landscape up until that time, combining a repeating eight-pointed star pattern with an elaborate border of concentric circles and interlacing arcs of color gradients. His geometric composition was intricate and meticulous, and he combined high-contrast colors in the star points with subtle variations in the border. This created an optical, pulsating pattern that appeared to spin from a distance.

This signature star was composed of ten colors. The star itself was black and yellow on a white background. Concentric circles in three shades of red formed an interior border against interlacing arcs, in four shades of blue or green, for the outer

border. The outer border colors were mixed in sequence by taking a true royal blue or a green composed of royal blue and chrome yellow, and cutting it in equal proportions with white to form a secondary shade, and again with an equal amount of white paint for each successive layer in the border. The resulting gradient added a level of depth, producing a profound visual effect.

By 1910, Milton Hill formed his own three-man painting crew with Oscar and Wilson Adam, two cousins from Temple, Berks County. Each barn took a little over one week for the three of them to paint, and the stars took Milton about eight hours to complete with two coats of paint. Throughout his life as a master painter, Milton’s process was methodical and precise. Along with his common painting tools, he carried the tools of a draftsman, consisting of compasses of various sizes, trammel-points, straight edges, squares, and scribes. Each star was scribed directly into the wood, creating cleanly divided edges for each color area in the design. This technique allowed him to maximize his time and effort, by providing straight score-marks to guide the edge of his brush. Milton also occasionally



used patterns, composed of metal shapes cut from tin that were backed with leather, which formed a pad that would not slide against the surface of the barn siding. While it is unknown exactly how many barns Milton painted over the course of his life, his career as a professional painter lasted over fifty years—a staggering statistic which stands as a testament to his prolific and hard-working life.

Throughout his career, Milton quietly carried with him a memento of his childhood days when he attended a one-room schoolhouse in Virginville—three small paintings of stars that he carefully folded and tucked into his toolbox. He had painted them in watercolor sometime around 1899, when he completed his final year of school after only six grades. The paintings are extremely advanced even for a child as precocious as Milton must have been, and the complexity of the stars is matched only by the accuracy of their rendering. What is most evident in these illustrations is that, even at such a young age, Milton had already begun to develop a distinctive style that would continue to set his work apart from that of all others in his time. A quiet man of few words, Milton carried these fragile paintings with him throughout his life, and showed them to only a select few who showed great interest in his work.

Milton Hill was a humble and introverted artist who spent far more of his time painting than debating, but he became impassioned when

he defended his work against those who called his stars “hex signs” and presumed them to have a supernatural significance. Milton had been painting for decades before this word was invented and came into common use, and he deeply resented that his work, and the work of fellow artists in the region, was subjected to this interpretation.

Nevertheless, he tended to be an unassuming man by nature, and even resisted the title of “artist,”

calling his son Milton Daniel Hill “the artist of the family” because he painted farmscape scenes of livestock on local barns.⁷⁹ Hill referred to himself as a “barn decorator” and “painter of various star patterns”—suggesting that he was merely a technician, as opposed to the creative genius that he really was.

In fact, were it not for Milton Hill’s public appearance at the Kutztown Folk Festival, and the promotion of his work to a national audience, he might have remained only a local personality with limited influence on the tradition as a whole. Instead, Folk Festival director Alfred L. Shoemaker and his coworker Olive Zehner recognized the

importance of Hill’s work, and courted him for years before he finally agreed to attend the Kutztown Folk Festival to demonstrate his art. This put Milton into the national spotlight as the foremost barn painter of the twentieth century, and this encounter with the Festival staff helped to launch the evolution of painting barn stars on commercial signboard.



The barn star artist Milton J. Hill (1887-1972) of Virginville, painting his classic star pattern on a barn in Berks County, ca. 1950. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Folklife Society Archive, Myrin Library, Ursinus College.



Above left: Barn star artist Milton J. Hill (1887-1972) painting on Masonite panels ca. 1950 in his studio at his farm west of Virginville, Berks County. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Folklife Society Archive, Myrin Library, Ursinus College.

Above right: A pair of original watercolor paintings by Milton Hill from his days in the one-room schoolhouse in Virginville, ca. 1899. Gift of Esther (Hill) Derr, Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

Left: Milton Hill's business card. Courtesy of Lee Heffner, grandson of Milton Hill.

Below: Weathered 1848 house blessing board of Jacob and Magdalena Hill, great-grandparents of Milton Hill. Courtesy of Harold and Esther (Hill) Derr.



THE TRADITION EVOLVES

According to Milton's family and those who remember the earliest days of the Kutztown Folk Festival, Milton was asked to attend the Festival on its inaugural year in the summer of 1950, but he was unable to do so due to the demand for his work as a painter and his busy schedule. The Festival staff requested samples of his work to display in his absence, but this was impossible as he had up until this point only painted his stars on barns. Instead, the Festival encouraged visitors to see the countryside for themselves, and included many barn images in the 1950 Festival Program. In 1951 the Festival took busloads of visitors through the countryside to see the work of Hill and other artists.⁸⁰

According to local legend, visitors asked Hill if they could purchase pieces of his work, but he answered that he could only be hired to paint barns. This was not particularly helpful to visitors from New York, New Jersey, or California, who had neither barns, nor geographic proximity to Berks County.

It was Dr. Alfred Shoemaker who first suggested that Hill paint his stars on commercial sign board, but it is unknown precisely when, and under what circumstances, Hill embraced this new art form. Some stories claim he stayed up that very night to prepare several stars which he promptly sold the following day, but it seems unlikely that Hill embraced the idea literally "overnight." Hill, who was too busy to attend the Festival, and operated a farm in partnership with his wife Gertrude, may not

have had the time to respond so quickly to such a request for commercial production of his work.

Nevertheless, by 1953, when Milton first appeared at the Festival as a demonstrator,⁸¹ he had already embraced the idea of painting his stars on Masonite, a new commercial composite signboard. Milton scribed each and every one of these signs, just like his barns, giving them an authentic feel, despite the novelty of the art form.

The very same year, artist John J. "Johnny" Ott of Lenhartsville (1890-1964) also arrived at the Kutztown Folk Festival for the very first time,⁸²

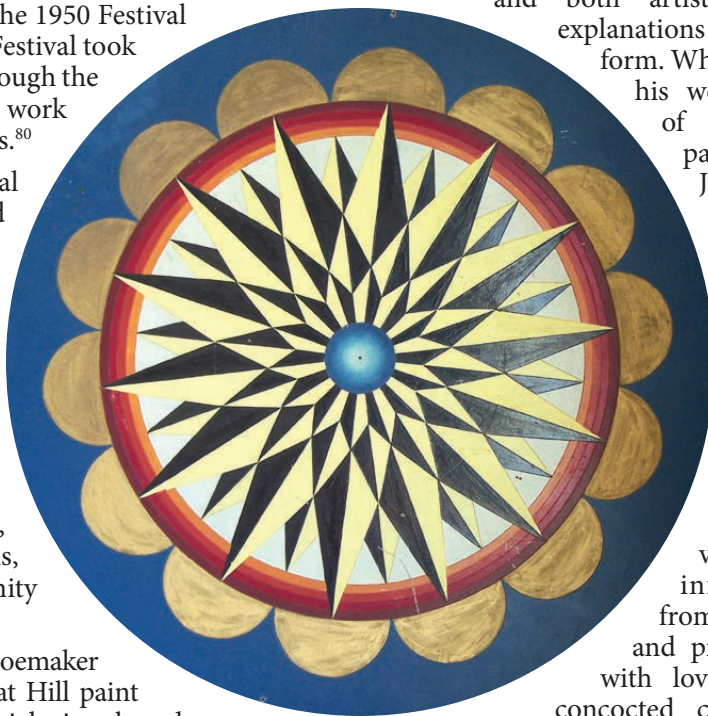
and both artists offered competing explanations for the origins of the art form. While Hill maintained that

his work was an extension of an old tradition of painting stars on barns,

Johnny Ott assumed the title of "Professor of Hexology," and explained that his work was imbued with magical power.

He told tourists that each design not only had a succinct meaning, but also served as a charm for a wide variety of concerns and infirmities—everything from assurance of success and prosperity, to assistance with love and romance. This concocted commercial mythology ensured that Ott's customers not only received a piece of his work, but also a story—a tall-tale that created lasting memorable encounters with the exotic "Hexologist" of the Dutch Country.⁸³

Ott was not only a painter, but the proprietor of the Lenhartsville Hotel, the walls of which featured his paintings and resounded with the jokes and tall-tales his visitors expected as he tended the bar. Ott first began as a painter of decorative tinware, specializing in the curvilinear patterns of birds, tulips, hearts, and flora. After successfully painting a chair for his wife sometime in the 1940s,⁸⁴ featuring an elaborate hybrid of a star with his floral elements,



Above: An original star by Milton Hill, painted ca. 1960 on commercial Masonite sign board. Although he did not sign his work on the front side, on the reverse of all of his stars on signboard, he stenciled his name and mailing address: "Made and Designed by Milton J. Hill Hamburg, R.D. 2. PA." Courtesy of Eric Claypoole.

he decided to take on the challenge of integrating the motifs of barn stars and his classic tinware patterns into something distinctly new. After first practicing on discarded hubcaps, he eventually settled on commercial signboard. By 1951, he was painting “hex signs” in the evening hours from a side porch studio, which visitors from the hotel frequented to buy his wares. His star patterns were an entirely different breed of art than the strictly geometric patterns used by barn painters. Ott never actually painted on barns, but loved to regale his customers with stories of how his paintings had magically provided fertility to the crops, or brought about miraculous life changes to those who bought and displayed them.⁸⁵

One of his favorite of these stories was widely circulated in the national news, claiming that two of his hex signs created to magically increase rainfall had been left outside too long against his advice to the farmer, resulting in the flooding of the Delaware River and millions of dollars in damage.⁸⁶

While Ott certainly profited from his tall-tales and performative, artistic persona, he was not the originator of the widespread misconception that traditional barn star motifs held supernatural significance. Early in his career, Ott himself was openly skeptical about this when interviewed by the press, and even let it slip that he started the whole

persona as a “joke,” which eventually evolved into a commercial success.⁸⁷ Implicitly, this story suggests that Ott’s enterprise answered a commercial demand fueled by the interest and misconceptions of visiting tourists, but the history of this public perception predates Ott’s work by decades and is rooted in the tourist travelogues from the early twentieth century.

MYTH OF THE HEX SIGN

In the early twentieth century, the invention of the automobile enabled tourists from all across the Mid-Atlantic to travel to rural Pennsylvania communities. For the first time, these unique communities were subject to the curiosity of visitors eager for explanations of the distinctive cultural landscape of the region. The decorated barns were a popular attraction, as they were easily visible from public roadways. In the absence of any widely disseminated information on the subject, authors and entrepreneurs hurried to fill the void with travel journalism that was often fraught with rampant misconceptions,

commercialism, and dubious interpretations of the culture. Many myths about decorated barns originated during this time, and have been perpetuated into the present day.

This includes the mythology of the “hex sign,” a term that was coined in the 1920s by journalists from outside the area who promoted Pennsylvania as a tourist destination. By virtue of national audiences eager for tourist publications, readers throughout the United States became rapidly aware of the “hex sign” myth, and locals remain divided on the issue.



Above: *The Baltimore Sun Magazine* of October 14, 1954, featuring Johnny Ott (1890-1964), self-proclaimed “Professor of Hexology” and owner of the Lenhartsville Hotel. The article, entitled “Hexer Hextraordinary” suggested that Ott’s signs were imbued with magical powers, along with the caption “Johnny Ott is probably the Pennsylvania Dutch country’s biggest producer of hex signs. He is shown here with a sun-and-rain sign, supposed to bring crop fertility.” This staged shot depicts Ott working in his studio in his classic tophat, which he later abandoned in the 1960s to don a flat black hat like that of the Amish of Lancaster County.



Wallace Nutting's *Pennsylvania Beautiful* (1924) featured original pen and ink drawings of decorated barns, such as this one located in Earl Township, Berks County. This one bears his original caption connected with the misguided notion of the “Hexafoos” as a dialect word for “Witch’s Foot”—a term that was never embraced by the Pennsylvania Dutch. Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

In 1924, an antiquarian, retired Congregational minister, and author of romanticized travelogues, Rev. Wallace Nutting (1861-1941) of Framingham, Massachusetts, released the first detailed explanation of the origins of southeastern Pennsylvania’s decorated barns to national audiences.

This piece of travel journalism was included in Nutting’s *The States Beautiful* series in a book entitled *Pennsylvania Beautiful*. The Reverend’s brief account of the barns, nearly hidden amidst his photographs of bucolic landscapes and line drawings of colonial antiques, was single-handedly responsible for inspiring the myth that the region’s barn star decorations were supernatural in origin.⁸⁸ Nutting wrote:

They are a decoration sometimes applied on the door heads or on or about the door. They are supposed to be a continuance of a very ancient tradition, according to which these decorative marks were potent to protect the

barn, or more particularly the cattle, from the influence of witches. It is understood by those who are acquainted with witches that those ladies are particularly likely to harm cattle. As the wealth of the farmer was in his stock, contained in his remarkably substantial barn, the hexafoos was added to its decoration as a kind of spiritual or demoniac lightning-rod!⁸⁹

Although Nutting never actually used the word “hex sign,” his phonetic spelling of the obscure dialect term “*Hexefuss*,” a term translating to “witch’s foot,” was the inspiration for “hex sign” in predominant use today. Nutting even provides the caption, “A Witch Foot Barn” for a line drawing of a highly decorated barn that stands in Earl Township, Berks County.⁹⁰

It is notable that Nutting describes his subject in an unusual way, as “marks” “on or about the door” rather than with precise descriptions of stars in elaborate arrangements on the siding of the barns.

However, there is a kernel of truth to Nutting's account that occasionally farmers would carve or draw a "*Hexefuss*" in chalk on a door.

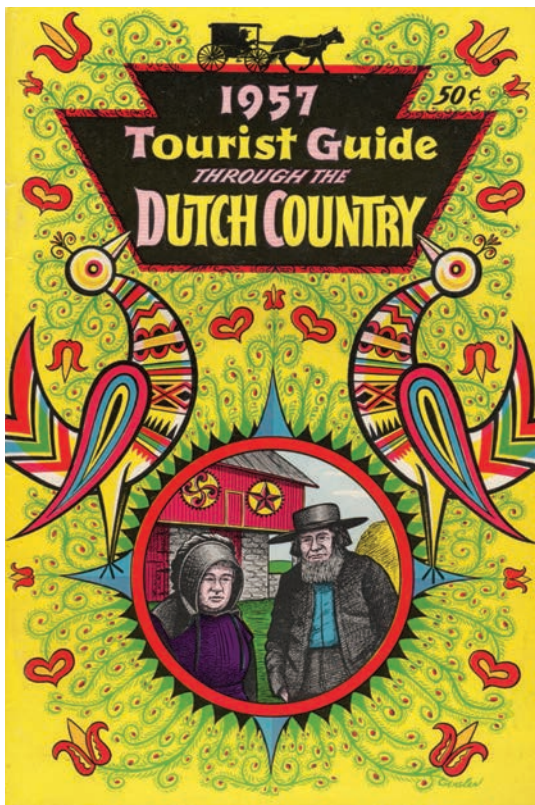
Nutting's description follows precisely what fellow Harvard graduate, archaeologist, and collector of early American material culture Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930) documented in his field notes ca. 1900 in the border region between Berks and Lehigh.⁹¹ Mercer's notes confirm, however, that he was not describing the barn star tradition, but rather subtle apotropaic ritual marks written in chalk on the interiors of barn doors far from the public eye. Although it is uncertain if Mercer himself was the source of Nutting's accounts, both of these men were part of the upper echelon of avocational collectors of early Americana, and were well aware of one another's work.⁹²

Coincidentally, Mercer, curator of the archaeological collections at the University of Pennsylvania, and a fellow faculty member and folklorist Dr. Edwin Miller Fogel, both documented the idea of the "*Hexefuss*" (plural "*Hexefees*") in their field work at the turn of the twentieth century as a chalk marking used by farmers to ward off the influence of the supernatural.⁹³ This was an ancient ritual marking that resembled the upright foot of a goose, and in some cases farmers would even nail the actual foot of a goose onto a barn door for protection from evil.⁹⁴

Above: The Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, Franklin and Marshall College, later known as the Pennsylvania Folklife Society, founded the Kutztown Folk Festival in 1950, and issued some of the region's first tourist guides that included scholarly photo essays on different aspects of the culture. However, the lavishly illustrated covers of these guides perpetuated a misconception that the Amish painted barn stars. In fact, the reason that barn stars are largely absent from Lancaster County is because the Amish do not decorate their barns as part of their religious commitment to plain living.

This ritual, however, bore no visual similarity with the colorful painted stars on the barns, and Mercer would likely have been aware of Nutting's error.

What is abundantly clear, however, is that Nutting was citing an altogether separate practice from the painting of barn stars, and ushered in an era when such confusion was acceptable to both popular audiences and the self-taught gentlemen-scholars of the times.



Eventually, Nutting's story evolved into the myth of the "hex sign." It's a hybrid word, combining the Pennsylvania Dutch word for "witch" and the English word "sign." Journalists preferred this simplification, which was later embraced by the region's tourist boom of the 1950s.

The Kutztown Folk Festival, founded by the Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center (later called the Pennsylvania Folklife Society) at Franklin and Marshall College, served to energize the tourist industry by promoting, not only the largest regional folk festival of its kind, but also some of the first illustrated tourism guides to the region. Ironically, it was a trio of scholars, Dr. Alfred Shoemaker, Dr. J. William Frey, and Dr. Don

Yoder, who created these first tourist guides, which included scholarly photo essays on different aspects of the culture. However, the lavishly illustrated covers of these guides perpetuated a misconception that the Amish painted barn stars, a fact later regretted by founding directors of the Society, who understood only too late the impact of such illustrations, seemingly sanctioned by the Society.⁹⁵

Many subsequent tourist promotions suggested the stars originated with Amish artists, but these designs were never found on barns in Lancaster, except along the border with Berks and Lebanon.

In fact, the reason that barn stars are largely absent from Lancaster County is because the Amish do not typically decorate their barns, due to their religious commitment to plain living. Although this is not necessarily a rule across all Anabaptist groups, it is certainly discouraged as a whole across the plain communities. Rarely, certain Mennonite farmers have, within the past generation, painted their barns in the Kutztown area, but this is largely because some have chosen to have their properties restored to their original states, including the stars that adorned the barns.⁹⁶ The Mennonites in the Kutztown area were not the original owners of these properties, but instead are descended from Lancaster County families that purchased large tracts of land in Berks in the 1950s and 1960s.

Nevertheless, visitors to Lancaster County today will likely see commercial hex sign plaques for sale at tourist gift shops and applied to storefronts, restaurants, travel agencies, and commercial attractions all along the Route 30 corridor, marketed as original features of the “Amish Country.”

Interestingly enough, it was the influence of Johnny Ott of Lenhartsville, Berks County, who introduced the hex sign to Lancaster through a partnership with Lancaster silk-screen printer Jacob Zook, who became the understudy of Ott in the 1950s.⁹⁷ Zook produced novelty items starting in the late 1940s, but created a veritable hex sign empire by mass-producing simplified versions of Johnny Ott’s work with silk screen technology. These first printed hex sign disks were originally credited to “Zook & Ott” and later simply to “Zook,” but he also later partnered with Ott’s successor, Johnny Claypoole of Lenhartsville, to produce a line of “Zook and Claypoole” signs.⁹⁸

In working closely with Ott, Zook promoted the notion that each hex sign stood for a very succinct verbal meaning, and it was this meaning that provided the magical effect of the sign.⁹⁹ For instance, Ott’s sign featuring two stylized turtledoves flanking a large red heart stood for “Love and Friendship,” while a six-pointed rosette in yellow, blue, and red,

with hearts between each point, was to evoke “Love and Romance”—both promoted as having the power to affect one’s love life. Ott’s “Daddy Hex” was called the father of all hex signs, having been allegedly copied from a cathedral window in Europe used to ward off “disease, famine, starvation and plague.”¹⁰⁰ These were among a wide range of patterns that were strictly modern, and were not historically painted directly on barns. Others were influenced more directly by barn star patterns, such as Johnny Claypoole’s sixteen-pointed barn star in green and yellow, which was promoted as symbolizing “success,” and an eight-pointed star with rain-drop shapes was called “Sun, Rain, and Fertility.” Although all of these notions were presented as traditional, it is clear that traditional folk art motifs were codified at this time for marketing purposes.

Ironically, for previous generations of Pennsylvania Dutch farmers, it was the stars



Above: The *Distelfink* is the Pennsylvania Dutch word for a golden finch, or “thistle finch,” which feeds upon the seed of the thistle and makes nests with the down. Since the golden finch curbs the propagation of thistle, farmers have admired the bird and considered it to be good luck, and a symbol of perseverance in the face of adversity. This inspired silkscreen artist Jacob Zook to mass produce a stylized *Distelfink* as a hex sign in the 1950s, and it is still widely available at tourist destinations in Lancaster County today.

Below: “The Daddy Hex”—a classic hex sign by Johnny Ott of Lenhartsville, who claimed its alleged origin was in the stained glass window of a cathedral somewhere in Europe. Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

in the sky themselves that were thought to influence the weather and the fertility of the land, and even human affairs such as success and prosperity, love and romance. Whether in biblical verses, or in the sacred calendar outlined in the common farmer's almanac treasured by the Pennsylvania Dutch folk culture, it was not the representations of the stars which governed these aspects of life, but the divine order and forces of nature that the art represented. In a classic case of mistaking the map for the territory, such motifs were promoted to tourists as having the power that had for previous generations belonged to the realm of the celestial and the divine.

A LIVING TRADITION

In the generations to follow, the artistic tradition flourished, but it formed two distinct and divergent branches—the modern hex signs produced in the style of Johnny Ott and Jacob Zook, combining geometric and pictorial images of birds, free-form flowers, and other figures on commercial signboard, as well as traditional geometric stars painted directly on the barns. Barn artists also adapted to new modern surfaces on barns, and produced traditional stars on signboard in order to apply them to barns covered in patent shingle or metal siding which could not be painted in the old style.

Above: A weathered barn star “ghost,” salvaged from a once-decorated wagon shed in Windsor Castle, Berks County. Barn stars weather in the elements, and the interaction between the rays of the sun and the surface of the wood produces a pronounced relief over the course of many years. This relief, often called a “ghost,” is still visible even if the star is painted over. Although many people have assumed that “ghosts” are carved, they are not. Instead, they are produced unintentionally by a process called differential solar weathering. Barn star artists, like Johnny Claypoole (1921-2004) and his son Eric use this weathering process as a guide for restoration of the old stars. Gift of Bart Hill, nephew of Milton Hill. Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.



Although Johnny Ott lamented in the early 1960s that he foresaw a “fading away” of the tradition,¹⁰¹ this couldn't have been further from the truth. Ott was concerned that there were too few artists to meet the growing demand that his work had created, and he feared that no one would take up his mantle following his impending retirement. So in 1962 he placed an advertisement in the classified section of the local newspaper, advertising that he sought a willing apprentice to learn the trade and eventually take over the business. A metalworker answered the call who had recently moved to Lenhartsville from Philadelphia with his family. His name was Johnny Claypoole (1921-2004), and he eagerly sought out Johnny Ott to establish the apprenticeship. While Ott had originally demanded three dollars in cash paid in advance for each lesson, he never once permitted Claypoole to actually pay for his apprenticeship.¹⁰²

The “Professor,” Johnny Ott, instructed Claypoole in the creation and layout of his repertoire of popular patterns and motifs, as well as the preparation of various materials upon which to paint, including Masonite disks, milk cans, and metal wares. Claypoole received all of the technical training in the art, but he also learned the subtler aspects of the trade.

Claypoole's big personality resonated strongly with Ott, and he became quickly aware that Claypoole had the ability to assume the role, not only of a commercial artist, but also of a storyteller, who could effortlessly promote traditional folk art through the magnetism of his public persona. While Johnny Ott certainly had a reputation for stretching the truth about the magical significance of his work, Claypoole was a humorist, who appreciated his instructor's tall-tales, and repeated them with gusto as an homage to the legacy of his mentor.

It was not long after Ott's retirement that Claypoole took his place at the Kutztown Folk Festival, where he became a national sensation. Johnny Claypoole's work was later commissioned for installations at the Smithsonian Institute in 1969, the British Embassy, and the Philadelphia Zoo, and was featured in widespread publications such as the *National Geographic* and *The New York Times*.¹⁰³ Johnny also collaborated with Jacob Zook of Lancaster, the famous promoter of commercial silkscreen hex signs, so that thousands of his designs were mass produced for tourist markets. Despite this success, as Claypoole matured as an artist, his public persona gained a level of introspection and depth that was largely absent in Ott's clever and quick-witted public persona.

Johnny Claypoole continued to tell tall-tales about the effects of his commercial hex signs on his customers. For instance, it was said that a couple, who were struggling to have children, bought a hex sign for "fertility" from Johnny Claypoole at the Kutztown Folk Festival, and five years later the couple returned to Claypoole's booth accompanied by six children and returned the sign to him saying they no longer wanted it in the house!

Although the telling of these stories was a highlight of Claypoole's promotional efforts, he also spoke plainly about his work, saying that any belief

in the magical efficacy of his art was a form of "mind over matter." He would often explain candidly that if customers wanted to believe that his paintings had the ability to affect their lives, that perhaps his art would function in a positive way for those people—because they believe it to be so, but not because his work was magical in any intentional sense. Thus Claypoole was able to participate in the artistic dialog of his era without compromising what he knew to be true about the origins of the tradition.

Although the work of Johnny Claypoole closely resembled his teacher Johnny Ott's work in many respects, Claypoole took his painting to another level. Instead of limiting his art to the commercial hex signs on signboard and tinware, Claypoole began to paint on barns whenever he could. He not only painted his original designs on barns, but he also undertook the repainting of historic barn stars.

Despite the fact that Johnny Ott was often depicted in the popular media as being connected with the painting of barns, he never actually painted a barn in his life. Numerous commercial disks painted by Johnny Ott were installed on local barns, but these have seldom survived to the present day. It is interesting to note that it was this development in the career of Johnny

Claypoole that enabled the cross-pollination of the commercial hex sign motifs with the strictly geometric motifs found on barns. Thus the two branches of the



Artist Johnny Claypoole (1921-2004) of Lenhartsville, who learned his technique from the legendary "Professor of Hexology" Johnny Ott (1890-1964), owner of the Lenhartsville Hotel and the progenitor of the commercial hex sign art of the 1950s and 60s. Claypoole painted commercial hex sign disks like his mentor, but unlike Ott, he also painted dozens of historic barns with stars in the region. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

art form, both commercial and traditional, were able to blend in the work of Claypoole. While Johnny Ott's work combined these two genres as early as the 1950s, artwork resulting from this synthesis never appeared directly painted on barn siding until Johnny Claypoole began painting barns.

According to local legend, it is Claypoole who was credited with coining and popularizing the term "ghost" as a descriptor for historic barn stars that weathered into the wooden siding over time. A "ghost" as he described it, was this ephemeral relief that allowed for the old geometric designs to be distinctly visible, even when painted over. Certain forms of raking light, common in the early morning and late afternoon, would cause these star patterns to emerge visibly from the siding, and disappear from sight when the sun's angle changed—giving rise to the idea of a "ghost."

Such a weathering process takes place when barn stars are exposed to the elements, and the interaction between the rays of the sun and the surface of the wood produces a pronounced relief over the course of decades. Although many people have assumed that "ghosts" are intentionally carved, they are not. Instead, the relief is produced unintentionally by a natural process called differential solar weathering. Johnny Claypoole often repainted historic barns using the ghosts as a template for his

restorations. This allowed him to maintain the local aesthetics of the landscape, while exploring up-close the geometric layouts of previous generations of painters, whose works were emblazoned on the wood.

Perhaps Johnny Claypoole's most visible evidence of success is that he never had to advertise for a pupil, as his teacher did, in order to find a suitable apprentice.

All of Claypoole's children grew up around the art, with many opportunities to work with their father and experiment with the trade. His son Eric had naturally gravitated to the work, and as a professional carpenter, he was perfectly suited to follow in the footsteps of his father. Eric had begun as all of his siblings did, helping his father as a boy, when he would cut and prime his father's disks, as well as sand and prep his father's milk cans. It was not long before his technical skill with wielding a brush also began to show.

Eric persevered in the artistic path, and soon became his father's partner in the business by helping with the painting of barns, and learning everything there was to know about the traditional forms and patterns. As Johnny grew older Eric's role increased, and after Johnny, at the age of 74, painted his last barn with Eric in 1995, Eric soon assumed full

responsibility for the painting of the barns. Johnny continued to paint commercial disks until the time of his passing in 2004.



Second-generation barn star artist Eric Claypoole of Lenhartsville, the most prolific barn painter of the present time, who has painted over 75 barns during the course of his career. He started helping his father Johnny Claypoole (1921-2004) paint barns in 1972.

Today Eric Claypoole has continued his father's legacy, and has become the most prolific painter in the Dutch Country. He has painted stars on more than seventy-five barns in Berks, Lehigh, Schuylkill, Northampton, Montgomery, Bucks, and Dauphin counties, and the numbers are steadily increasing. Eric typically completes six barns per year, a rate which will allow him to reach the milestone of more than one hundred barns within less than a decade.

As a restoration carpenter and artist in wood by trade, Eric appreciates historic buildings and is restoration minded about his approach to painting barns. He supplements his primary daytime occupation with painting as side-work. Despite this secondary designation, painting is Eric's passion. Methodical, process-oriented, and exacting, Eric is fascinated by geometry, and continually pushes the limitations of the tradition, by recombining celestial patterns in new and unique ways.

In addition to barns Eric Claypoole paints commercial hex sign disks on signboard, and demonstrates annually at the Kutztown Folk Festival. While the Festival is his largest annual exhibition, it is also an opportunity for Eric to raise awareness for a preservation effort called the Hex Tour Association, which operates in partnership with the Festival to generate thousands of dollars to assist with subsidizing the repainting of historic barns in the area immediately surrounding Kutztown—the epicenter of the largest concentration of decorated barns anywhere in the United States. Annually, about three or four barns are selected to receive a grant for half of the total cost of restoration of the historic barn stars. Eric Claypoole has worked with the Hex Tour Association for over a decade, and has repainted many of the finest

examples of Berks County's decorated barns. In this way, the Association is assisting Eric in his life's work of bringing the ghosts of Pennsylvania's barn stars back to life— at a much faster rate than would otherwise be possible.

Eric's process for painting each barn is systematic. Whether repainting an historic ghost, or starting from scratch on new barn siding, Eric begins by prepping the surface to remove any damaged paint or debris from the wood. Next he applies three coats of the highest quality white acrylic paint in order to create a solid foundation for the star pattern. If a ghost is present, this white background helps to unify the surface and bring out the weathered image of the geometry, serving as the basis for the next step in the process. Eric then uses a trammel compass, a straight edge, and a triangle pattern of 30° - 60° - 90° to create a basic layout in pencil for the star pattern. Each color layer is then applied individually starting with the lightest colors. A final touch-up helps to resolve any paint drips or inconsistencies in the weathered wood. A completed design lasts up to 25 years.

While Eric is indeed a master painter, his sense of propriety does not interfere with his creative and intellectual generosity in sharing his techniques with others. Having come from a family of five brothers and two sisters who all grew up around their father's artistic process, Eric is used to sharing and collaborating,

encouraging his family and friends to try their hand at folk art painting. Eric has taught his techniques to his two daughters, his son, his nephew, dozens of his friends, and in recent years has collaborated with Andrew Shirk and Patrick J. Donmoyer in



The use of three painted crosses above the windows and doorways of barns finds its origins in house and barn blessing traditions of Europe, where the three crosses refer to the Three Kings, or Magi, who followed a star to the biblical nativity. Eric Claypoole carries on this tradition today, painting three crosses above windows and doorways, like this example. Maxatawny Township, Berks County. Courtesy of Patrick J. Donmoyer.

painting barns and demonstrating at the Kutztown Folk Festival. He takes great pleasure in his work, and offers lectures, workshops, and open studio visitations to educate the public and increase public awareness of the tradition.

One important element that characterizes Eric's work is his love of learning and discovery. He is motivated to examine and understand the geometric layout of historic designs as a way to connect with the artistic and mental process of artists who came before him. To Eric, the angles and proportions of the historic designs are not random, but part of a subtle geometric language that affects the perception of movement and rhythm within the radial pattern. Eric perceives sequences and regionalisms in the historic designs that would be imperceptible to the casual viewer, and attempts whenever possible to compare the patterns that are spread throughout the Dutch Country.

Eric is interested in exploring all the possibilities of potential meanings in the designs, and remains open-minded about the history and cultural implications of the traditional patterns. For instance, he keeps in mind the meanings passed to his father from Johnny Ott, such as sun, rain, love, fertility, success, and good luck, as well as the religious implications favored by his Roman Catholic father, who thought of the red central point of each design as symbolic of the blood of Christ, the twelve points of a star as representing the apostles, and three lilies representing the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity. At the same time, he is fascinated by archeological evidence of such motifs in the ancient world, as well as the sacred geometry found in all the cultures of the world.

The Claypoole legacy has been a tremendous force for the present day preservation and revival of the barn star tradition. Scores of barns in southeastern Pennsylvania have been touched by the brushes and the hearts of the Claypooles, and the numbers are increasing each year. Eric's energy and innovation will undoubtedly continue to transform the landscape for decades to come, inspiring younger generations of painters to advance the artistry and agricultural heritage of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

It is perhaps with this in mind that Eric offers a most compelling explanation of the rotational qualities of his stars. Eric maintains that the central radiating pinwheel of his classic star patterns, rendered in alternating colors, symbolizes the ages of humanity spinning through time.¹⁰⁴ This metaphor expresses a sense of continuity in the human experience over the millennia, represented in the stars and their celestial courses through the heavens.

CONCLUSION

As public expressions of art and tradition in action, the barn stars of the Pennsylvania Dutch have captured the interest and imaginations of generations of Americans, and offer a unique opportunity to visually engage with the history and folk culture of the region. The rich diversity of folk art patterns found on barns in the Dutch Country is rivaled only by the diversity of beliefs surrounding their origins, applications, and history, and this textures the regional experience and appreciation for the tradition.

As a living tradition, barn stars are not merely ancestral relics of the past, but opportunities for cultural expression among future generations who will continue to explore their roots and spiritual identities, their relationship with the land, and the legacy of artistic expression in the rural landscape.

Just as the barn stars have come to symbolize the Pennsylvania Dutch culture, so too are the stars in the sky reminders of humanity's place in the cosmos and continued search for meaning. Although the stars in the heavens and their celestial arrangements have held a wide range of significance over the millennia and cannot be assigned a single, fixed meaning, the ability of the stars to inspire humanity to consider the nature of cosmic order has had a profound and lasting influence on the human imagination. This universal sense of wonder echoes throughout history among diverse cultures across the globe, uniting all of us in our eagerness to seek meaning in our origins among the stars.

ENDNOTES

1. Among the first of these photographers to document the decorated barns of Southeastern and Central Pennsylvania was William E. Ferrell (1870-1949) of Bethlehem, President of the Easton Car and Construction Company, whose travels brought him into contact with over 700 decorated barns in the 1920s through the 40s, as indicated in a presentation given to the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society Annual Meeting, at the Bucks County Historical Society, in May of 1940. Other notable documentarians were Herman E. Wright, who photographed barns, but was better known for his display of miniature paintings of designs found on barns throughout the region, featured at the Kutztown Folk Festival in the 1950s; and Guy F. Reinert (1892-1962), public school teacher and Secretary of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, whose photographs appeared in the educational essays in the Kutztown Folk Festival programs beginning in 1950.

2. Guy F. Reinert's surveys were limited to a series of photographs published in the publications of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, notably in the works of John Joseph Stoudt, including *Consider the Lilies, How They Grow* (1937) Vol II, Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, Allentown, PA: Schlechter's Publishing, and in the revised edition, *Pennsylvania Folk-Art: An Interpretation*. (1948) Allentown, PA: Schlechter's.

3. This survey culminated in the second volume of the Annual Publication Series of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University. Donmoyer, Patrick. 2013. *Hex Signs: Myth and Meaning in Pennsylvania Dutch Barn Stars*. Kutztown, PA: Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

4. The 2008 survey was compared to the geographic scatter plot produced by Thomas E. Graves for his 1984 dissertation, *The Pennsylvania German Hex Sign: A Study in Folk Process*. University of Pennsylvania, and subsequently published in Yoder, Don & Thomas E. Graves. 2000. *Hex Signs: Pennsylvania Dutch Barn Symbols & Their Meaning*. 2nd Ed. Mechanicsburg, Pa: Stackpole Books.

5. For a more detailed summary of the immigration of German-speaking people to Pennsylvania and North America, see Bronner, Simon J., and Joshua R. Brown. 2017. *Pennsylvania Germans An Interpretive Encyclopedia*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; Loudon, Mark L. 2016. *Pennsylvania Dutch : The Story of an American Language*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

6. Yoder, Don. 1950. "Pennsylvania Dutch... or Pennsylvania German?" *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*. II(1), May 1.

7. Bronner & Brown 2017.

8. For the most comprehensive study of the Pennsylvania Dutch language see Loudon 2016.

9. Yoder, Don. 1960. "Plain Dutch and Gay Dutch: Two Worlds in the Dutch Country." *Pennsylvania Folklife*. II: Special Festival Issue, Summer 1960. <https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pafolklifemag/9>

10. The question of the chronological parameters has been hotly debated; for a history including examples from the eighteenth century through the present day, see Donmoyer 2013. The dialog concerning the earliest stars was utterly changed in the early

2000s when early examples were discovered, and challenged the idea that barns were only painted after 1830. See Fooks, David. 2002. "In Search of America's Oldest Hex Signs," *Der Reggeboege* 36(1):21-27; Fooks, David. 2003. "The History of Hex Signs." *The Pennsylvania German Review*, Fall 2003. Kutztown, PA: Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center; compare with earlier studies, such as: Shoemaker, Alfred Lewis. 1953. *Hex, No!* Lancaster, PA: Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, Franklin and Marshall College.

11. Donmoyer 2013

12. Shoemaker 1953.

13. Yoder & Graves 2000.

14. In the mid-twentieth century, scholars were divided into two camps, those who believed that the stars were strictly decorative, and those who believed that they were protective or symbolic, as explained in Don Yoder's "Scholars' War" in Yoder & Graves 2000. The third perspective that the stars motifs are celestial representations is the primary theory undergirding *Hex Signs: Myth and Meaning in Pennsylvania Dutch Barn Stars* (2013), see Donmoyer 2013.

15. These narratives were collected as informal oral history by Eric and Johnny Claypoole in Northern Berks County.

16. Whittemore, Carroll E. 1959. *Symbols of the Church*. Boston, MA: Whittemore Associates, Inc.

17. The author's home congregation at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church of Lebanon is one of the finest examples of the Neo-Gothic revival in the Pennsylvania Dutch region, with the present building combining nineteenth- and twentieth-century periods of construction, featuring the work of Latvian-American stained-glass artist Leonids Linauts of Mohnton, Berks County.

18. For more discussion of these possible religious implications, see Donmoyer 2013.

19. This idea was promoted by Alfred L. Shoemaker in his classic essay published under several editions and titles. See Shoemaker, Alfred L. 1953. *Hex, No!* Lancaster, PA: Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, Franklin and Marshall College, and again in Shoemaker. 1955 *The Pennsylvania Barn*. Lancaster PA: Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, Inc., Franklin and Marshall College.

20. Barn star artist Milton J. Hill's ledger lists his purchased pigments used in the early twentieth century, and nineteenth-century barn painter Perry Ludwig's recipe is mentioned in Kauffman, Harry H. 1964. *Golden Stars on the Barn*. Privately published, no printing location.

21. For more on the origins of the Pennsylvania barn as a distinctive architectural type, see Ensminger, Robert F. 2003. *The Pennsylvania Barn: Its Origin, Evolution, and Distribution in North America*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

22. Author's 2018 surveys in the Palatinate and the Swäbische Alb; see also Ensminger 2003, and Yoder & Graves 2000.

23. Ensminger 2003, uses the English term Folkhouse not used in Weiss; European studies include the classic text, Weiss, Richard. 1946. *Volkskunde der Schweiz*. Erlenbach-Zürich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag.

24. Maurer, Gilgian. 1951. *Hausinschriften im Schweizerland*. Spiez: Verlag G. Maurer; and in context with other Swiss applications of the same motifs, see Rubi, Christian. 1965. *Bauernmalerei aus drei Jahrhunderten*. Verlag: Bern Paul Haupt; and

Rubi, Christian. (No date.) *Beschnitze Geräte*. Berner Heimatbücher Nr. 22, Bern: Verlag Paul Haupt.

25. Maurer, 1951.

26. Donmoyer 2013. These finding are based on original survey work conducted in 2008.

27. Donmoyer 2013; Fooks 2003 & 2002.

28. A plaque at Jerusalem Union Cemetery in Stony Run lists Maria Elizabeth (Ladich) Kistler as Samuel's first wife, but no other vital statistics are given.

29. This absence of crosses in early Pennsylvania churches and graveyards was first described to me by Dr. Don Yoder, and included in Donmoyer 2013.

30. Kline, John Jacob. 1911. *A History of the Lutheran Church in New Hanover, (Falkner Swamp) Montgomery County, Penna.* Lancaster, PA: The New Era Printing Co.

31. Swamp Union Church in Reinholds was constructed in 1806, with four stones naming the building masters, mason, and carpenter, and three of the four stones have rosette stars in circles to accompany the inscriptions.

32. KJV Isaiah 28:16.

33. KJV Psalm 118:22.

34. KJV Matthew 2:1-2.

35. KJV Revelation 22:16.

36. Stoudt 1937.

37. KJV Hosea 14:5

38. This is no longer extant, but visible in an old photograph in the Pennsylvania Folklife Society Archive, Ursinus College.

39. The author has examined scores of early cemeteries throughout Southeastern and Central Pennsylvania, and the only two early graveyards with crosses on stones appear at the Catholic Church of the Blessed Sacrament, in Balley, Berks County, and the old cemetery in Richmond Township, formerly associated with St. Henry's Catholic Church. Even the old stones associated with the Catholic congregation at Schippenberg, Albany Township lack crosses.

40. See also Barba, Preston A. 1954. *Pennsylvania German Tombstones: A Study in Folk Art*. Allentown, Pa: Schlechter; and Stoudt 1948.

41. KJV Revelation 2:10.

42. KJV Revelation 21:21.

43. KJV Psalm 103:15.

44. KJV Song of Solomon 2:1.

45. The date is no longer legible on the stone, but cemetery records held by the congregation at Zion Evangelical Lutheran, Manheim, show transcriptions of the stones performed sometime in the mid-twentieth century, providing the date of "May 27, 1784."

46. Other examples of this carver's work include stones in the cemeteries at Emanuel Lutheran, Brickerville, Old Zion (Royers) Reformed, Brickerville, and the Ephrata Cloister.

47. These stones are at Muddy Creek Lutheran Cemetery, Denver, and Bergstrasse Lutheran Church, Ephrata Township, both in Lancaster County.

48. These stones are prominently found at cemeteries in the Cocalico Valley, especially Swamp Union Church Cemetery, Reinholds and Muddy Creek Lutheran, Denver.

49. This inscription is on the reverse side of the gravestone of the child James Old (1773-1777), buried at Emanuel Lutheran Church, Brickerville. The hymn is "Triumph over Death in Hope of Resurrection," from Isaac Watts' 1707 *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. London: J. Humfries.

50. Hinke, William John. 1925. "A history of the Tohickon Union Church, Bedminster Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania: with copy of church records, Reformed congregation, 1745-1869, Lutheran congregation, 1749-1849". *Pennsylvania-German Society*, XXXI.
51. KJV Psalm 31:15.
52. KJV Psalm 39:5.
53. Manuscript, Georg Börstler birth records, ca. 1790, Schwartzwald, Berks County. Heilman Collection of Patrick J. Donmoyer.
54. In the Collection of the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center. Fraktur Artist Daniel Otto lived and worked in Miles Township in Centre County, where this certificate was produced, but this Fraktur is unlike Otto's other known works.
55. Birth and Baptismal Certificate, Printed and For Sale at the "Eagle" Book Store, No. 542 Penn Street, Reading, PA ca. 1880.
56. This blessing was photographed by Guy F. Reinert circa 1950. The original 1802 barn was located by Christopher Witmer in 2017, but the blessing inscription is no longer legible.
57. See "Blumme & Schtanne" in Donmoyer 2013.
58. Shoemaker 1953.
59. See Donmoyer, Patrick. 2018. *Powwowing in Pennsylvania: Braucherei and the Ritual of Everyday Life*. Kutztown: Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University; Donmoyer, 2013, 53-64.
60. The Agricultural Almanac series started by printer and publisher Johann Baer (1795-1858) of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, has been in print for over two centuries. The firm, later called Johann Baer & Sons, and eventually Johann Baer's Sons, issued both English and German almanacs. *Baer's Almanac* is still widely distributed today in English only as one of the classic almanacs in the German almanac tradition.
61. Grumbine, Ezra. 1905. *Folklore and Superstitious Beliefs of Lebanon County: A Paper Read Before the Lebanon County Historical Society, October 20, 1905*. Lebanon, PA: Lebanon County Historical Society, 282-284; see also Fogel, Edwin Miller. 1995. *Beliefs and Superstitions of the Pennsylvania Germans*. Editor C. Richard Beam. Millersville, PA: Center for Pennsylvania German Studies.
62. Yoder, Don. 2016. *The German Bible in America*. Editor Patrick J. Donmoyer. Kutztown: Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.
63. KJV Genesis 1:14.
64. KJV Ecclesiastes 3:1-3.
65. Matthew 2:1-2.
66. Luke 21:25.
67. Title and passage translated from the introduction of Walz, E. L. 1830. *Vollständige Erklärung des Calenders, mit einem faßlichen Unterricht über die himmelskörper*. Reading, Pa: Ritter & Co.
68. KJV Psalm 91:1.
69. A birth and baptismal certificate in the Heritage Center provides the location of Mount Penn. For an overview of Egelman's career and interests see Winkler, Louis. 1973. "Pennsylvania German Astronomy and Astrology VII: Carl Friederich Egelman (1782-1860)". *Pennsylvania Folklife Magazine*. Book 56. <<http://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pafolklifemag/56/>>; and Moyer, Del Louise. 2003. "The Skies Proclaim the Work of His Hands: Carl Friederich Egelman (1782-1860)". Official Blog of the Philadelphia Free Library. Accessed 01/15/2019. <<https://libwww.freelibrary.org/blog/post/1789>>
70. Egelman, Carl Friederich. 1846. *Verbesserter Calender aus das Jahr 1846*. Reading, Pa: J. C. F. Egelman.
71. Selections of this manual are in the archive of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University. See Moyer 2003; and Winkler 1973.
72. Translation by the author. See Moyer 2003 for an alternate translation.
73. Early examples documented by Patrick J. Donmoyer and Guy F. Reinert include examples from 1840 in Perry Township, Berks County; 1849 in Greenwich, Berks; 1850 in Upper Milford, Lehigh County; 1852 Milford, Bucks County; 1857 in Albany Township, Berks; 1857 in Greenwich, Berks; 1858 in Maxatawny Township, Berks.
74. Donmoyer 2013, Graves 1984.
75. Pigments are listed in Milton J. Hill's ledger at the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University, and in accounts of Perry Ludwig in Kauffman 1964.
76. This is likely George K. Hoch (1860-1948) of Richmond Township, Berks County, husband of Fannie S. (Hill) Hoch, buried at Zion Moselem Lutheran Church Cemetery, Berks County. PA Death Records, 1948.
77. The Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.
78. Information in this section on the life of Milton Hill comes from three sources: Interviews with Harold and Esther (Hill) Derr and Lee Heffner in Virginville in 2012; Milton Hill's Ledger at the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University; and Zehner, Olive G. 1953. "The Hills from Hamburg." *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*, IV(2): 16, 13.
79. Zehner 1953, "The Hills from Hamburg."
80. Frey, J. William. 1951. "Three Worlds Came to the Second Annual Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival." *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*, III(6): 1. See also "Festival to Sponsor Tours through the Dutch Country" in the same issue of the *Dutchman*.
81. Zehner, Olive. 1953. "Folk Festival Dinkelfoodles." *Pennsylvania Dutchman*, V(4):16.
82. Zehner 1953, "The Hills from Hamburg."
83. Donmoyer 2013.
84. Newspaper article, "Hex of a Way to Make a Living." *Pittsburgh Press*. Sunday, Sept 25, 1955. The earliest dated Ott hex sign is dated "June 1951" and is in the collection of Steve Stetler of the Deitsch Eck Restaurant, formerly the Lenhartsville Hotel, in Lenhartsville, Berks County.
85. Donmoyer 2013.
86. This story was even endorsed as evidence of Ott's alleged "powers" according to Gande, Lee R. 1971. *Strange Experience: The Autobiography of a Hexenmeister*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
87. *Pittsburgh Press*. Sunday, Sept 25, 1955; and "Johnny Ott - Expert painter of 'Hex' Symbols." *The Morning Call*. Allentown, Sunday, Nov 13, 1955.
88. Yoder & Graves 2000; Donmoyer 2013.
89. Nutting, Wallace. 1924. *Pennsylvania Beautiful*. Framingham, MA: Old America Company Publishers.
90. Donmoyer, Patrick J. 2018. "Berks County Barns Inspired Hex Sign Myth." *Berks County*, a publication of the *Reading Eagle*. Wednesday, June 27, 2018.
91. "Hexefuss" in Henry Chapman Mercer Collection, *Archaeological Research Notes. Folder 17. Madrid, Delaware Valley, Yucatan Field notes. Including notes for Tamanend article, draft of Lehigh Hills papers for magazine, sunbonnets, Powwow formulae, Macungie notes -FH 150. 1863-1930.*
92. Schlereth, Thomas J. 1999. *Material Culture Studies in America*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 16-17.
93. Fogel 1995.
94. Long, Amos. 1972. *The Pennsylvania German Family Farm: A Regional Architectural and Folk Cultural Study of an American Agricultural Community*. Breinigsville, PA: Pennsylvania German Society.
95. Foreword by Don Yoder, in Donmoyer 2013.
96. There are several examples of this in the Kutztown area, most notably, the restoration of the barn at the Isaac Bieber homestead of 1801. Others include the property of Burkholder's Produce stand, which was restored by the owner, but later covered over with white metal siding, as well as the property of the Sauder's roadside market.
97. Zook listed himself as "apprentice" to the "Professor Johnny Ott, Hexologist" on a set of printed notecards dated 1963, which Zook screen printed and marketed in Lancaster County.
98. A hex sign in the collection of Eric Claypoole is marked "Zook & Claypoole," and it is a sixteen pointed star in yellow and green, with a red center. This design eventually became part of Zook's repertoire, and is no longer credited to Claypoole, who introduced the design to Zook.
99. These meanings are widely available in the form of advertising sheets, which show little hex signs the size of postage stamps, each with a succinct meaning. One is titled "Jacob Zook Original Hex Signs: Designs Currently Available" (no date) and another as recent as 1990 is titled "Handcrafted in the Pennsylvania Dutch Country by Jacob Zook, Hexologist," along with the motto: "If it doesn't say Zook it's not original."
100. Two labels on the back of a 1950s hex sign say "Johnny Ott, Hexologist, Hex Sign and Distelfink Artist, Lenhartsville, PA" and a hand-typed label reading "THE DADDY HEXER, The beginning of all hex signs, this is in a church in Europe to keep away disease, famin[sic] starvation. & plague. and this is the one you see in the church today. JOHNNY OTT." Heritage Center, Kutztown University.
101. Newspaper article "Pennsylvania Hex Artist Seeks Technique Revival" *The Pocono Record*. Monday, December 4, 1961.
102. Donmoyer 2013. From interviews with Eric Claypoole in 2007, 2012, 2017 & 2018.
103. Donmoyer 2013.
104. Interview with Eric Claypoole 2018. This interview was translated into Pennsylvania Dutch, and published as "Die Leit drehe darrich die Zeit: Interview mit em Eric Claypoole" in the world's only Pennsylvania Dutch language newspaper, *Hiwwe wie Driwwe*, 20:1, Spring-Summer. Kutztown & Ober-Olm: Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.



Tools of the Trade (clockwise from the top left):

A fragment of old wooden barn siding showing a weathered barn star "ghost" with a relief created overtime by solar weathering. Weathered stars serve as templates for painters restoring old barns in the region. Courtesy of the Kutztown Folk Festival.

A trammel or bar compass, used to create the geometric layout of a barn star; a pair of patterns used to create the cross motifs between star points on Berks County barn stars; a square for creating right angles in the geometric layout of a star; the compass dividers used by the prolific barn star artist Milton J. Hill (1887-1972) of Virginville, Berks County. Gift of Harold and Esther (Hill) Derr, daughter of Milton Hill, Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center, Kutztown University.

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